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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

JUNE, 1967 VOL. 3, NO. 5

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE UGLY MAN AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Entrenched in a Castle built for pure evil, a mad nobleman guards his deadly secret, as Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin seek a last clue to the Thing which drains blood from humans—and leaves them as living dead men!

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Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

HOLMES TAYLOR
Associate Editor

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THE UGLY MAN AFFAIR

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Some called it treachery. Some called it madness. But all agreed on one thing—it ended in a death horrible beyond belief! While the entire Far East reeled on the brink of war, Solo and Illya sought the ugly madman who stole the blood of humans—and changed them into insensate living dead men!

PROLOGUE—THE CORPSE WITH TIRED BLOOD

THE FOG rolled and billowed. Somewhere the bells in a church tower rang half after midnight.

The yellow bonnet lamps of the specially converted taxi penetrated the murk for barely a dozen feet ahead. The driver, an operative on loan from the London station of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, had rolled the window down an inch on his side.

Fog came drifting through the crack. It carried the smells of dampness, fish, rotting garbage. A squeal of laughter split the night. Two girls in mini-skirts appeared in the headlight beams. The driver hit

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NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

his brakes. The taxi ground to a halt a foot away from them.

Laughing and pointing, the girls in their Carnaby Street apparel went on, arm in arm.

The driver tugged the bill of his greasy cap and let out a sigh. "Near thing. Sorry if I shook yer up, guvs."

In the gloom of the rear seat, Napoleon Solo put a finger to his lips and scowled. Sitting forward in a posture of tension beside him, Illya Kuryakin framed words silently: *"Anything wrong?"*

Solo squinted his eyes, shrugged to indicate his uncertainty. He held a small plastic wafer with an earplug insert to his right ear. A double strand of wire ran from the wafer across the back of the front seat to a jack in the dashboard.

Except for a conventional instrument cluster crowded in at the left of the dash, all of the other dials, gauges and softly glowing lights on the board were unmarked and obviously had nothing to do with the taxi's operation.

"The signal's weak," Solo said at last. "Can you get any more volume, Parkleigh?"

The U.N.C.L.E. operative masquerading as a taxi driver, Cockney accent and all, fiddled with a switch. "That's as high as she'll go, guv. Is the signal still goin' away from yer?"

Solo shook his head. An uneasy tension began to build inside of him. He and Illya Kuryakin had been watching Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce for nearly a week. The doctor had made no suspicious moves, no contacts with persons who conceivably could be associated with the supre-nation, THRUSH.

Then, tonight, as the two agents sat eight rows behind Ffolkes-Pryce at Convent Garden, the break came.

An usherette summoned the doctor from his seat just before intermission. Illya followed Ffolkes-Pryce to the lobby and observed him enter a telephone cubicle.

The doctor emerged a few minutes later looking pale, nervous, and in a hurry. He left the theatre at once. Solo and Kuryakin were right behind him.

Parkleigh's special car was parked in front. As Solo jumped in, Illya pretended to feel ill. He staggered against the rear fender of the cab which Ffolkes-Pryce occupied. In a second he planted the homing signal on the bumper.

Ffolkes-Pryce's cab shot away into the lowering fog. Solo kept Parkleigh at the curb for five minutes, the earpiece already hooked up and the signal tracking loud and clear. That way, Ffolkes-Pryce wouldn't have his suspicions roused by the sight of a strange vehicle following.

Now, however, the signal no longer seemed to be receding. It went *beepa-beepa-beepa* on a sustained level that was lower than before.

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series— "The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

Suddenly Solo understood. He unplugged the ear instrument. "I think we've got him. The signal is softer because he's no longer in the taxi. He's gone indoors."

Illya indicated the turgidly rolling grayness outside their car. "He could be anywhere within six blocks. Does anyone have a bloodhound handy?"

The driver chuckled. "Next bes' thing, guv. You blokes who hang out in America may think you got the corner on the scientific stuff, but our lads in the lab here don't do so bad. 'Arf a mo."

Parkleigh's thin hands touched a stud on the dash. A panel chunked aside, revealing a small square screen of frosted glass. Parkleigh touched a switch. The screen lit up pearl white, with a grid of red lines overlaid.

At the touch of another switch, an amplifier brought the *beepa-beepa* signal through a speaker alongside the display glass. A tiny brilliantly white blip appeared on the screen inside one of the gridded squares.

"There he is, guv. Somewhere in the block just up ahead. We can't miss him."

Solo's mouth tightened into a relieved smile. "Your boys aren't half bad at all. Thanks."

"All we have to do is search one complete block," said Illya, somewhat glumly.

Parkleigh looked miffed. "It's better'n searching eight or ten, ain't it?"

"Definitely." Solo levered open the right hand door, prepared to jump out.

"Listen, I don't want to violate security," Parkleigh said, "but I been driving you blokes around for a week and struggling with this silly-ass accent in the bargain." Parkleigh's speech had now become the clipped, elegant diction of Oxford and the nobility. "Mind telling me what all the wind's up about? Who is this chap you fellows are after?"

Illya explained, "A Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce. An authority on research and development of small nuclear powered hand weapons. Highly theoretical stuff, but potentially very valuable."

"Is that a fact?" said Parkleigh. "Who does this chap work for? The War Office?"

"U.N.C.L.E.," Solo explained. "And you wouldn't have heard of him because his work's so highly

secret. The Beirut station picked up a tip the first of the month that Ffolkes-Pryce was going to defect to our friends at THRUSH.

"Illya and I were sent over here to pick him up, follow him, see whether it happened and more important, how it *could* happen. Ffolkes-Pryce's loyalty was never in question before. He has the highest security clearance you can get in U.N.C.L.E. But now it looks like it is happening, so we'd better move."

And Solo stepped out onto the pavement, giving a quick jerk of his head to indicate that Illya should follow.

From the left pocket of his maincoat, he took his rod communicator. He called softly to Parkleigh, "I'll open auxillary Channel B and you open your receivers to pick it up. That way, if we need any reinforcements fast, you can relay the call."

"Anticipating a bit of a rough go?"

Solo turned up his coat collar. "On this kind of a night, in this part of London, I anticipate a lot of things. All unpleasant. Let's go, Illya."

The agents melted into the darkness.

TWO

THE FOG pressed clammy and unpleasant against Solo's cheeks as they walked along. They passed the entrance to a mews. From its darkness they heard sounds which distinctly resembled one man throttling another. A drunken costermonger reeled at them from the left, whining for a handout. Illya thrust him away. The man promptly collapsed in the gutter, snoring.

As they reached the cross street, a lorry passed at high speed. Solo had the uncomfortable feeling that they were traveling through a nether world. Little or nothing of their surroundings could be seen. The murky buildings barely put forth any light at all.

Moving to the right out of the range of a feeble street lamp, Illya drew the sections of his long-muzzled U.N.C.L.E. pistol from inner pockets of his own dark maincoat. He snapped them together, checked the firing controls and slid the entire weapon back into the specially cut long outer pocket.

"That's the block over there, Napoleon. Can you make out how many buildings?"

"Looks like just one. A big one," Solo answered. "Let's get a little closer."

They crossed cautiously. A high, spike-topped iron fence ran off to the right and left. An immense, sagging Edwardian building loomed beyond it. Solo bent to peer at a small brass plate affixed to two of the black iron spikes alongside the iron gate. The plate read: *The Fordyce Undertaking Establishment, Ltd.*

Illya sniffed the fog. "Morticians. How cheerful."

A quick tour on foot told the two U.N.C.L.E. agents that the premises of Mr. Fordyce and his fellow death specialists occupied the entire block. The iron fence encircled the whole property. The place had a rear gate, for delivery vans and hearses no doubt, but it was closed with a heavy padlock and chain.

In minutes the two agents returned to the main gate. Solo rubbed the fingertips of his right hand together like a cracksman warming up.

"Stand by for alarm bells, poison gas and trap doors in the sidewalk," he said, and gave the lever handle of the gate a tug.

With a squeak of rusty hinges the gate opened. Solo looked startled. Illya laughed low.

"You don't give us enough credit, Napoleon. No one's expecting us because we did such a splendidly anonymous job of shadowing Ffolkes-Pryce."

Solo wasn't convinced. He closed his hand around the pistol muzzle in his pocket and eased through the gate. "Or maybe the booby traps are a little further inside." Cautiously he moved up the shortwalk, climbed the ornate marble staircase which led to tall double doors.

A placard hung from one of the handles. Illya crowded up to read it: *Closed until further notice.*

Gently Solo tested both the door handles. Each one gave a short way, then resisted. "Locked up tight." He reached beneath his coat to pull out a small metallic-finish box. "But I'd rather not try this on the main door. Let's see if there's another."

Illya Kuryakin indicated something to their left. "Looks like a walk way there. What are we going to do once we get inside? Make funeral arrangements for some fictitious nephew?"

"Just see what's happening. If Ffolkes-Pryce is in this place, and in the claws of our bird friends after all, we'll get him out as best we can. We'll take him back to London HQ and see what we can do to wring some kind of answer from him as to why one of the top researchers in the organization decided to play games with the enemy."

By now they had reached the corner of the building. They crept all the way around to the rear. There Solo applied the metallic box to a locked wooden door alongside the shadow-clotted delivery bay. He inserted small prongs on the box into the wood of the door right next to the lock. Then he twisted a dial on the box's face.

A low, continuous clicking came from the box for around one minute. At the end of that time, Solo pried the box loose. He slipped it in his pocket and cautiously turned the doorknob.

The door swung inward. Ahead stretched a dim, low-ceilinged hall-

way. Paint peeled from its walls. A feeble light burned far down, near a staircase. The agents slipped inside. Illya shut the door without making a sound. The air smelled of formaldehyde.

Napoleon Solo led the way down the corridor, testing the floor with the tip of his toe each time he took a step. Evidently Illya had been correct in his judgment of a few minutes ago. If this were indeed a THRUSH nest, it was lightly guarded at its perimeters. Maybe Solo and Illya had done their tedious, time-consuming job of shadowing Ffolkes-Pryce to perfection. On the other hand, the apparent disregard of security measures by THRUSH could indicate some other condition entirely.

A slipshod operation, perhaps? Solo doubted it. THRUSH was never slipshod. Then confidence? Complete confidence that Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce belonged to them? The thought confounded and upset Solo.

Defection by a man of Ffolkes-Pryce's status was almost unthinkable. The specter of a gaping weakness in U.N.C.L.E.'s internal intelligence procedures loomed as a real shocker, a very dangerous one.

Had a THRUSH agent in Beirut not become involved with a woman on the outside, and taken the reprimand of his superiors in less than good humor, and then gone over to U.N.C.L.E. for revenge, taking with him all the little rumors and snippets of hearsay he possessed, U.N.C.L.E. would never have learned of Ffolkes-Pryce's impending defection in the first place.

At least Mr. Alexander Waverly had not given them any additional information when he issued the assignment. Solo could only assume something was drastically wrong with internal intelligence.

At Solo's side, Illya stiffened in mid-stride. Solo cocked his head. Sure enough, voices drifted down the dim staircase ahead. The agents moved closer.

By kneeling, Solo managed to look up the stairs into a large room with a cracked, buff-colored ceiling. Vague lighting up there showed him musty old velveteen drapes hung to either side of the entrance at the head of the stairs. An uncertain voice, words indistinguishable, was saying something. Then someone else spoke in much stronger, forceful tones:

"—of course, Doctor, we are under no obligation to explain anything to you. You are here. You belong to us now. You will work for us in whatever capacity we say. And you had better understand that."

Again the mumbling voice. Then the second speaker laughed: "Yes, yes, naturally we'll take care of your—ah—condition." The laugh carried a malicious note in it. "But only as long as you remain loyal to THRUSH. You are quite important to us, Doctor, you and quite a few

others like you. Not long from now, you see, it is men just like you who shall tip the scales finally and for all time in our favor. Ah, I see by your expression that you understand. Splendid. The craving does get hold of one after a bit, doesn't it?"

Napoleon Solo bobbed his head again. Illya understood the signal instantly. Side by side, long-muzzle pistols drawn out, the men inched toward the bottom of the stairs for the charge upward.

Solo had no idea of how many THRUSH agents might be in the room above. But he'd heard no other voices besides the two. He was willing to gamble. Down came Solo's right foot on the lowest stair tread. Bells clanged.

With a curse, Solo launched his charge upward anyway. THRUSH booby traps this far inside the perimeter of one of their stations was unusual, but he kicked himself for not having learned by now to expect the unexpected from the supra-nation.

Illya raced after him up the stairs. The heavy voice in the room above shouted: "Gregor! The emergency stairs! Timon, you and Markos stop whoever is coming up. This way, please, Doctor! Hurry!"

Sounds of a struggle blended with the heavy feet of men running toward the top of the stairs. The curtains hanging at the stair-top billowed aside on wired tracks. The curtains had hidden two banks of vertical metal cones, six cones to a bank, mounted on the wall on either side of the stairs.

Just as Solo reached the level of the lowest cone, all twelve cones discharged a thin, grayish gas which struck his face, blinded his eyes and brought nausea to his throat.

A THRUSH agent in a business suit loomed at the head of the stairs. The man fired. Solo dodged. Illya flattened against the other wall, shielding his mouth with one hand as he shot back with the other.

The Thrushman pitched forward with blood streaking his shirt bosom. Coughing violently, Solo kicked the man on down the stairs.

From the room above came more sounds of struggle, the heavy voice exclaiming: "Doctor—a little faster!"

The second THRUSH agent ap-

peared. Solo charged up past the last of the spewing cones and hit the agent a smashing body block with his shoulder. Solo and the Thrushman spilled backward into the room. It was a huge, poorly-lit parlor filled with overstuffed furniture and Tiffany-style lamps hanging on tarnished green chains from the ceiling.

As Solo rolled and thrashed across the Oriental carpet, avoiding the kicks and the gun hand of the man he'd tumbled, he glimpsed a fat, bald-headed man, another agent, and thin, goggle-eyed Ffolkes-Pryce struggling on the room's far side. Ffolkes-Pryce seemed dazed, confused, reluctant to follow the other two—

Solo had no more time to evaluate the situation. His THRUSH enemy twisted over on his belly and aimed his gun directly at Solo's head. Desperately Solo whipped his own gun hand up and over.

Too late. He knew he wouldn't make it in time—

A low, flat pop in back of Solo announced Illya's arrival. The Thrushman took the bullet in his ribs, yelling with pain. He struggled to one knee, eyes glazed. The knee collapsed under him. As he fell, the gun in his flailing hand exploded.

On the other side of the parlor, Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce screamed.

The fat man cursed fluently in a foreign tongue. He shoved Ffolkes-Pryce away and disappeared down a stairway which had opened in the floor near the baseboard of the parlor's outside wall. Dr. Ffolkes-Pryce was sprawled on the Oriental carpet. The fat Thrushman had evidently judged him to be fatally shot and had decided to save his own neck. Solo and Illya charged in pursuit—

Only to drop to their knees, doubled with intestinal cramps and unmerciful pain. The delayed effects of the blast of gas from the stair cones left the two agents lying helpless for the better part of fifteen minutes.

Finally Solo felt a measure of control return to his twitching limbs. He fought down the sour taste in his throat, weaved to his feet. Ffolkes-Pryce lay on his back. The secret escape stair gaped.

Illya stumbled toward it, went down it. He returned in two minutes. His head appeared above floor level as he said: "It goes all the way to the basement. A tunnel leads to a false manhole in the street. They are gone, the two who were—"

Suddenly Illya stopped. He saw the expression of horror on Solo's face. He climbed the rest of the way into the room.

"The shot got him in the neck," Solo asid, kneeling beside Ffolkes-Pryce. "He's dead but—Illya, look at what's coming out of the wound."

Face wrenching into a mask of disbelief, Illya stared. The bullet had torn a sizeable wound in

Ffolkes-Pryce's scrawny throat. But instead of deep red blood fountaining out, a thin fluid poured down the scientist's neck and soaked his collar. The fluid was almost transparent. It bore only the faintest of pink tinges.

"Napoleon—" Illya clutched his friend's shoulder. "That doesn't look like blood or run like blood, it—"

"But that's what he's bleeding," said Solo, pointing. "Whatever it is."

The pinkish-clear fluid poured from the wound in the dead man's neck. Then Napoleon Solo noticed something else, and the nightmare began in earnest. Solo's shaking index finger moved near the wound, to indicate a pair of tiny red puncture-marks in the neck of Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce.

And the word that leaped into Solo's dazed mind unbidden was—*vampire.*

PART I—

UGLY IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

"MR. SOLO—MR. KURYAKIN," said Mr. Alexander Waverly, "I have a confession to make."

Illya's right eyebrow lifted. "Sir?"

Waverly gestured with the stem of the perpetually empty pipe.

"You heard correctly, Mr. Kuryakin. A confession. An admission, if you will, that I did not give you and Mr. Solo all of the background details concerning the Ffolkes-Pryce assignment."

Waverly's expression grew dour. "I did not do so because I did not have full clearance. Those of us in Policy and Operations agreed amongst ourselves that the threat which now faces this organization could be of such magnitude that we dared not make a move until we had translated our speculations into a reality. The speculations, as you will understand in a moment, posed a peril to U.N.C.L.E. of a kind only imagined in our wildest nightmares. With your return of the good doctor's corpse to our laboratories, you have indeed translated this speculation to a reality, and made it imperative that top agents be assigned to take counter measures at once."

Waverly drew in a long breath. "We may face the most massive, insidious and potentially devastating threat to U.N.C.L.E. in our entire history."

Napoleon Solo had been inclined to laugh a moment ago. Now the lines of Waverly's face, the intensity of Waverly's expression, convinced him he'd better not. But he did say:

"I can't imagine what could be that devastating, sir."

"Can't you, Mr. Solo? Consider this. Manipulation of U.N.C.L.E. personnel, including those with the highest of clearances such as Ffolkes-Pryce, so that they be-

come, willingly or unwillingly, the instruments of THRUSH. Consider a traitor within our own ranks, Mr. Solo, and how much potential damage that traitor could do. Then multiply a single traitor by ten, and ten again. That is the magnitude of the threat we may confront."

Stunned, Solo said, "Defection?"

"On an incredibly vast scale." Waverly clicked his cold pipe against his teeth and sank into a chair. "Nothing more and nothing less. A dreadful prospect, eh?"

"Ffolkes-Pryce was one of the defectors?" Illya asked.

Mr. Waverly nodded. "And our internal intelligence has not broken down. Those of us at the top in Section I cooked up the story about the Beirut leak as a cover. We knew about Ffolkes-Pryce's peculiar behavior. But if a good number of our people got wind of what we suspect, panic would spread. Brother against brother in our ranks, so to speak. We mustn't have that. Hence the fiction about Beirut. However, it has now become imperative for us to place you two on this assignment."

Waverly stared out from beneath his rather prodigious brows. "I needn't lecture you gentlemen on the burden of secrecy which is now upon you."

A grim silence then, filling the elaborately equipped room with an almost tangible tension. Against the window pane, forlorn raindrops ticked. The early evening shower blurred the lights in Manhattan's skyscrapers.

Solo and Illya had flown the specially refrigerated corpse of Dr. Ffolkes-Pryce back to America aboard an U.N.C.L.E. prop-jet. They arrived late in the afternoon. Hungry and fatigued, they went directly to Waverly's office to report. They were still there, without having eaten or rested. This too served to drive home to Solo the terrible seriousness of the situation which he did not as yet fully understand.

The man slumped in the chair, Alexander Waverly, served as the chief of Section I, Policy and Operations. His office was equipped with computers, built-in TV monitors and a large, circular motorized conference table which revolved at the touch of a button. Few outsiders had ever seen the room. Fewer still of the eight million plus people in New York were even aware that it existed.

This headquarters room was the strategic center of the entire U.N.C.L.E. complex, which was secreted behind the facades of a row of buildings a few blocks from the United Nations enclave in the city's East Fifties. The buildings consisted of a large public parking garage, four dilapidated brownstones and a modern three-story whitestone.

The first two floors of the whitestone were occupied by an exclusive key-club restaurant, The Mask. On the third floor were sedate of-

fices. These, a front, belonged to U.N.C.L.E. They interconnected with the maze of steel corridors and suites which hid behind the decaying fronts of the brownstones.

There were four known entrances to the three-story U.N.C.L.E. complex, one of them being through the third-floor offices in the whitestone and another through a carefully contrived dressing room in Del Florio's Tailor Shop on the level just below the street.

Within U.N.C.L.E. headquarters proper no staircases could be found. Four elevators handled all vertical traffic. And inside the steel-walled rooms, where signal lights of red, amber, purple, green, royal blue blinked constantly in coded sequences, worked a crack cadre of alert young men and women of many races, creeds, colors and national origins.

The equipment installed for their use was the most sophisticated known. The complex devices for communication included high-powered shortwave antennas and elaborate receiving and sending gear hidden away behind a large neon advertising billboard on the roof. These resources, utilized by top agents like Solo and Illya, stood between the world and the collapse of a delicate balance of terror—and should the balance tip, the supra-nation of fanatics known by the code name THRUSH would soon step in to claim the spoils.

Finally Napoleon Solo spoke. "I hate to say it, sir, but I'm a little disappointed. After all, I should think Section I could trust us by now."

"Of course, of course, Mr. Solo. In all conventional affairs. But this latest THRUSH threat is so appallingly unconventional that Section I decided not to leak it even to our own, until we were sure."

Mr. Waverly stared at Solo intently, as though trying to convince him via the earnestness of his expression. Waverly was a middle-aged, rather seedy man with a long, lined face. His hair was the neatest thing about him, combed down on one side from a precise part. He wore now, as always, exquisitely baggy Harris tweeds.

Speaking sometimes with deceptive slowness, Mr. Waverly seemed an anachronism in the sleek metallic modernity of the office. But his outward appearance and manner hid a man incredibly tough and tough-minded.

Illya sat with a leg hooked over the arm of a conference chair. He looked bookish and introverted as usual. His blond hair fell nearly to his blue eyes, which had circles of tiredness beneath them. In response to Waverly, he said: "You are telling us, sir, that this Ffolkes-Pryce mess was not an isolated case?"

"I am saying precisely that. Before you go on this assignment, I want you to review the taped data thoroughly. So far only members of Section I have seen it. It con-

tains names, dates, complete summaries of dozens of similar incidents which have occurred within U.N.C.L.E. during the past few months. We have lost top Operations and Enforcement operatives. We have lost research people. We have lost clerk-typists. In short, up till now it has been a closely guarded secret that not only have many of our people taken to acting strangely and then disappeared—quite a few of them have actually proved to be double agents, right within our own ranks."

Solo shook his head. His dark eyes were hooded, thoughtful. They reflected the glow of flashing computer lights along the wall. Solo was wearing dark gray slacks, a matching double-breasted blazer with silver buttons engraved with the Canadian maple leaf, and a pair of his $75 hand-lasted shoes from London. A richly patterned paisley handkerchief welled from the breast pocket of his coat.

Illya rose and began to pace. "Well, sir, perhaps we'd better have some specifics. How many defections have actually taken place?"

Mr. Waverly needed no statistical tables at hand. He had nearly total recall of everything he read:

"Twenty-two since last April. Eighteen were aborted, but the first four succeeded, so far as we know. The personnel involved in those four incidents—chaps like Whiteman, our top Section II fellow in Burma, and Dr. Arkojenian of the cryogenics lab—simply vanished. Then of course there have been others in less advanced stages. Once we got onto the pattern, we began to shift some of these critical people, remove key responsibilities from their hands in case they—ah—did go over. We have not succeeded in every case. Witness Ffolkes-Pryce."

Solo walked to the window and stared out at the rain. "A minute ago, sir, you made reference to U.N.C.L.E. people acting strangely. Now you just referred to a *pattern*." Solo swung round, somber-faced, no trace of his usual good humor visible. "Just what do you mean?"

"Oh, ah," said Mr. Waverly. "Excellent question. It has become apparent that those U.N.C.L.E. operatives who turn into security risks suffer from something which, at first anyway, resembles merely the effects of over-work. Extreme fatigue, bad dizzy spells, nervousness—"

"I feel that way often enough myself," Illya commented with a wry look.

"Naturally, for brief periods, we all do," said Waverly. "But those whom this THRUSH malady strikes—we call it a malady for want of a better term—are perpetually afflicted. The symptoms become worse day by day. Efficiency takes a sharp drop. Loyalty, determination, spirit—these suffer markedly and visibly.

"We really had no idea of what

was happening at first, when the first defector disappeared in Nairobi and was later seen being very chummy with some known THRUSH operatives in East Berlin. Others afflicted with the symptoms have apparently continued to work in our organization, and it now becomes clear that perhaps they have been assigned by THRUSH to do just that. Continue at their stations, as double agents."

Solo snorted. "I can't buy it, sir. How could THRUSH undermine U.N.C.L.E. that way? By spooning drugs into our food? Hypnotizing us while we sleep? Our security precautions are too tight for things like that to happen."

"Agreed," said Waverly. "Which is why Section I watched this state of affairs with such utter dismay. Then you gentlemen brought back the corpse of Doctor Ffolkes-Pryce."

Solo understood. The hair on his neck prickled. But Illya spoke it first: "His blood."

"Exactly," said Waverly.

"Abnormal," said Solo. "More like some kind of serum or foreign fluid."

"Right again," said Waverly. "The lab, incidentally, is having great difficulty breaking down the samples they took from Ffolkes-Pryce."

Waverly pulled a sheaf of blue flimsies from a pigeonhole in the edge of the circular conference table.

"Glance through these if you wish. All they say is that the fluid found in Ffolkes-Pryce's circulatory system contains traces of three compounds of the hydrobrionic alkaline class. Those compounds are suspended in the fluid base whose formula as yet defies isolation. But the hydrobrionics, I am informed, are most effective at robbing a person of will power and softening his mind."

Napoleon Solo rubbed his palms on the arms of the chair. His skin felt clammy and cold. "In other words, sir, you're suggesting that THRUSH has found a way to alter the composition of a man's blood —and therefore his will?"

Mr. Waverly gave a troubled

shrug. "A hypothesis only. Thus far, when we have aborted defection, the bodies of the defectors have either been stolen or destroyed. We have had no physical evidence to go on. Ffolkes-Pryce is the first. But it does seem like a valid, if gruesome, premise. After all, those marks—" Mr. Waverly gestured vaguely.

Illya said, "Yes, the marks on his throat. Two tiny pricks."

"I thought of the old vampire bit in London," Solo said with a rather nervous laugh. "Castles in Transylvania, noblemen who drink blood from a victim's throat—"

Mr. Waverly nodded slowly. "I would scoff too, but I know the depth of the technological resources of THRUSH. I also know that in principle such an idea might work. Suppose the neck impressions were the marks of small needles."

Horrified, Solo tried to thrust the significance of it from his mind. Its irrationality terrified him. Yet as a professional operative, he could not allow himself to become emotionally unstrung by phantoms and fancies.

Still, the word *vampire* persisted in his mind.

And he saw at once that if Waverly's speculations were correct, THRUSH could have found the ultimate weapon. Utilizing this weapon, THRUSH could strike at U.N.C.L.E. from within and destroy it, bringing about the victory, at last, which THRUSH had so far been unable to achieve by other means. Solo vividly remembered the pale transparent pinkish fluid dribbling down Ffolkes-Pryce's neck, staining his collar and the Oriental rug there in the carnage of the funeral parlor—

Illya Kuryakin broke the silence: "If the lab fellows aren't making progress, sir, what's to be done?"

"We cannot wait for results from the lab," Waverly replied. "We have a much more pressing assignment. It involves a young woman from our own staff who is scheduled to depart tomorrow on a most critical and delicate mission. Here, let me show you."

Stepping to a wall console of dials and frosted glass display panels, Waverly spoke into a microphone: "Mr. Jacques, let me have the picture, please."

The projectionist hidden away in an adjoining office answered with an affirmative syllable over the loudspeaker. A low whine filled the room. One of the display panels lit. On it appeared a full-face view of an exquisitely lovely young girl, all sandy-gold hair, wide, intelligent amber eyes, a delicate nose and a pink, full-lipped mouth. She looked to be in her late twenties.

Napoleon Solo's fingers went white as he held the arms of his chair. *"Elisabeth!"*

Illya covered his eyes. "Good heavens."

Mr. Waverly frowned. "Mr. So-

lo, are you feeling quite all right?"

"Yes, sir. It's just that—seeing Elisabeth's picture startled me. I haven't seen her—in person, I mean—for several months."

"Miss d'Angelo was one of our most trusted operatives in Section II," said Waverly.

Now the horror clutched tight at Solo's throat. *"Was?"*

"Two weeks ago, Miss d'Angelo began to exhibit the symptoms of which I have spoken. Fatigue. Dizziness. Nervousness. This was just a week after the start of her indoctrination for the very important mission she is scheduled to undertake for us tomorrow.

"In fact—" Mr. Waverly glanced at the ranked clock faces on one wall. They showed the times in various world capitols "—Miss d'Angelo is scheduled to depart Kennedy Airport for Rome at eight tomorrow morning. I am saying, Mr. Solo, that THRUSH may have hold of her. And if that is the case, she could bring destruction down on all of us. We—"

Suddenly Waverly stopped. He stared at Solo. "Oh, ah, yes. I understand. Evidently you and Miss d'Angelo have been something more than simply fellow workers?"

Remembering the tart sweetness of Elisabeth's mouth one rainy night in Central Park, Solo said with a hollow voice, "Yes, sir. We were good friends for quite a while. In the natural course of things, with assignments taking each of us all over the world, we sort of drifted away from each other. But she's still one of my—sir, they can't have gotten to Elisabeth!"

"The symptoms," said Waverly, "are identical with those of Ffolkes-Pryce and the others. I'm sorry, Mr. Solo, but that is the short of it."

Illya said, "What's this assignment she's carrying out in Rome, sir? Not something to do with the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference, is it?"

"Just that." In a gloomy tone Waverly proceeded to explain.

During recent months—as Solo and Illya both knew well—relations between two of the largest oil states in the Middle East had frayed to the breaking point. Shootings, lootings, border assaults became daily. Charges of provocation were hurled by both parties. Behind the scenes, U.N.C.L.E. agents worked desperately to amass evidence to indicate that THRUSH was actually fomenting the trouble, hoping to touch off a Middle Eastern war and then step into the breach and seize both countries during the ensuing chaos.

In a last-minute move to head off holocaust, reasonable men from both nations had agreed to assemble in Rome for a conference to work out their difficulties. U.N.C.L.E.'s Section I cabled that it would send a top operative carrying microfilm documents and tapes to prove conclusively to the dele-

gates that THRUSH was behind the attacks supposedly staged by nationals of both countries.

Waverly finished: "Miss d'Angelo was the agent chosen to carry the evidence to Rome, address the delegates and present U.N.C.L.E.'s case."

Scowling, Solo said, "Why don't you pull her off the assignment? If she's involved with THRUSH—but I still can't believe that!"

On his feet, white-faced, Solo faced Waverly, who made a placating gesture.

"Mr. Solo, I have never said that our people have voluntarily placed themselves under THRUSH's domination. That is what I hope you and Mr. Kuryakin may learn. Indeed, it is imperative that we do learn how THRUSH is taking over these people. And the most active case at the moment is Miss d'Angelo. She is the only one of our agents currently in a position to directly sabotage and jeopardize our work in favor of THRUSH. We must prevent her, of course. But we must also seize the opportunity to learn that we can about this newest threat.

"That is why I cannot and will not cancel her assignment. Besides, to do so when her presence has already been announced to the conference delegates might possibly prejudice our position. No, Mr. Solo, even though your personal feelings are involved, I shall have to insist that you be on that flight to Rome in the morning along with Mr. Kuryakin. Your tickets are reserved. I have already sent a man to your respective flats to pack your things."

Solo turned, staring out at the rainy-drenched night skyline. He thought of Elisabeth's lovely face. Of the marks on Ffolkes-Pryce's neck. Vampire, he thought uncontrollably. *Vampire.*

Illya yawned, stood up and said softly, *"Arriverderci,* New York."

Turning, Solo glowered. His face resembled a skull. The eyes were shadowed, the cheeks tired and gaunt. *"Arriverderci* sanity would be more like it," he said.

TWO

THE THIN, cold rain fell without letup all through the night. It splashed against the windshield of the taxi that carried Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin to Kennedy airport in the half light early next morning.

Solo slumped grumpily in the cab's rear seat as it swung up the drive to the large international terminal building looming in the mist. A whine of engines shook the cab faintly, indicating that the lowering weather had not yet curtailed all flights.

Illya reached in his pocket for bills to pay the driver. "A miserable morning."

"No more miserable than the mood I'm in," Solo replied.

A look of concern crossed Illya's face. "Did you manage to catch any sleep last night?"

"No. All I could think about was Elisabeth. Illya, I just can't swallow the notion that she's no longer loyal."

With a significant glance at the cabbie, Illya murmured, "Of course it is possible that it may be happening entirely against her will."

Painfully Solo recalled Elisabeth's lovely face, remembered with special poignance their last date.

First they went to a musical at the Winter Garden. They finished the evening with a sumptuous Italian meal at a little place in the East Sixties. The chef, a burly, pink-cheeked Neapolitan, was a special friend of Elisabeth's. The chef had grown up in the hills not far from the small mountain village in Italy where Elisabeth's father had been born. Her mother had been a British mannequin whom her father had met while studying civil engineering in London.

Elisabeth was always welcome in the chef's kitchen, so she sailed to the spice cabinets and doctored the chicken cacciatore in her own special way. Even the chef applauded when he tasted it, and brought a complimentary bottle of good red wine to their table to demonstrate his approval.

The evening ended with one of those wonderfully hokey carriage trips through the Park. Although she was a top professional, Elisabeth allowed that she loved being a hopeless romantic in her off hours. Solo held her and kissed her and they promised, quite seriously, to see one another as often as possible.

Their separate careers, and separate assignments, prevented it. But Napoleon Solo still classified Elisabeth as one of a very, very few girls who might, just might have succeeded in making him consider matrimony one of these days.

The taxi squealed to a slippery stop in front of the terminal. Rationalizing Elisabeth's potential guilt away didn't alter the fact that they were assigned to spy on a girl to whom he'd been quite close.

"I say, what a couple of deadpans," a familiar voice called as they left the cab. A young man in a tweed topcoat straight from Saville Row approached. "Considering your gloomy expressions, I'd say the worst has happened. Waverly sack you, did he?"

"Not funny, Mark," said Illya. "What are you doing here?"

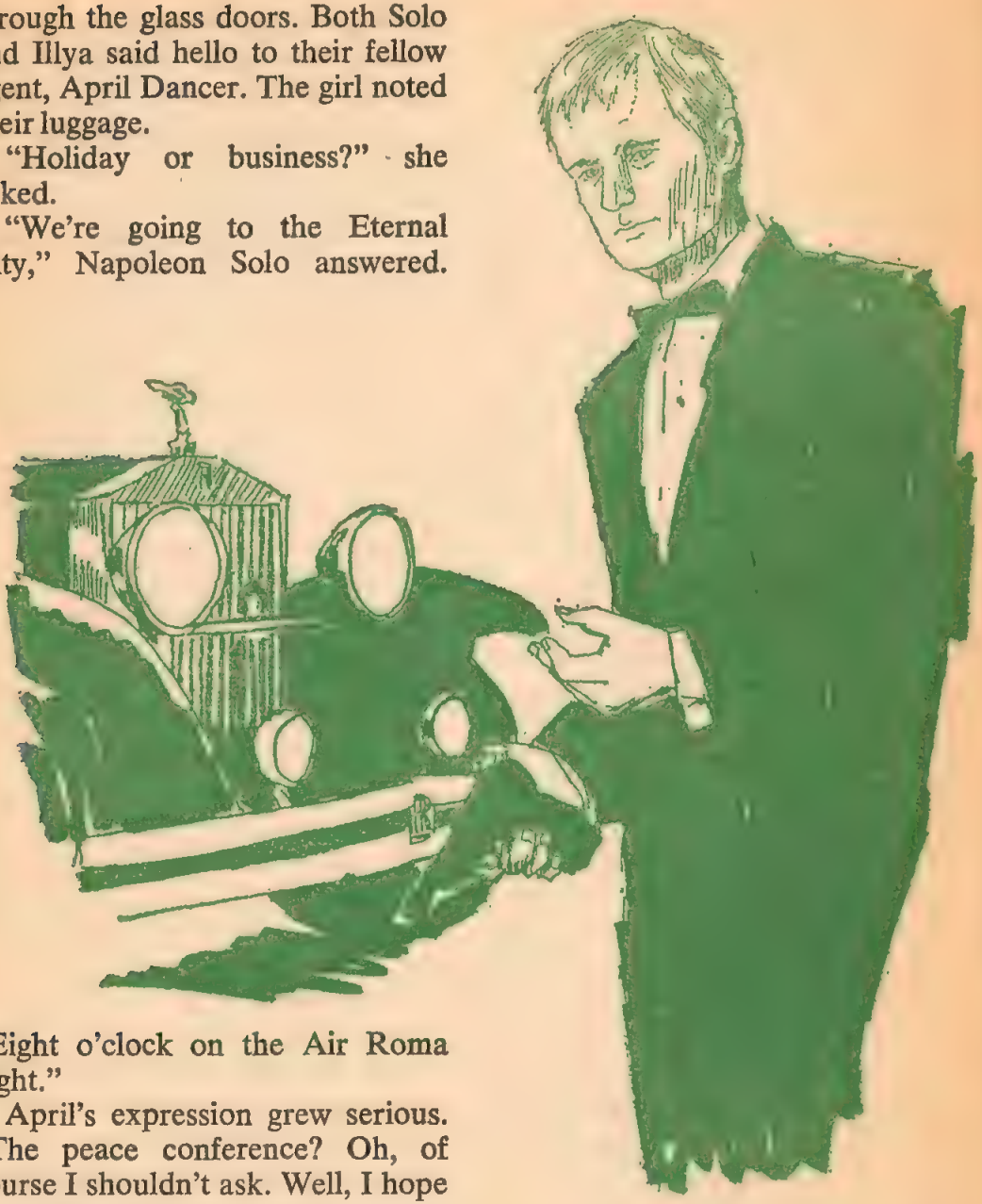
Mark Slate hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Just got in from Madrid. Cleared up that bit of a mess with the bullfighter who was stealing secrets from the general's daughter at the American air base. April should be here somewhere—"

Slate turned, just as an intensely pretty, dark-haired girl in a dark green traveling suit emerged

through the glass doors. Both Solo and Illya said hello to their fellow agent, April Dancer. The girl noted their luggage.

"Holiday or business?" she asked.

"We're going to the Eternal City," Napoleon Solo answered.



"Eight o'clock on the Air Roma flight."

April's expression grew serious. "The peace conference? Oh, of course I shouldn't ask. Well, I hope you have good luck. That's a dangerous situation shaping up there."

"Um, yes, sticky," murmured Mark. He waved. "Till we meet, and all that."

Illya Kuryakin walked to the glass doors. Solo followed, lighting a cigarette. Inside the busy building voices with a variety of accents announced flights over loudspeakers. The lights of the terminal glared in Solo's eyes. He threw his cigarette into an urn, deciding that

this whole assignment was jinxed.

He had been flattered, as always, when Alexander Waverly assigned him to a top priority matter. Mr. Waverly did not give that sort of recognition lightly. But this was one time, Solo thought, when he should have spoken up and refused.

To have to play games with Elisabeth was an idea he disliked intensely. The only reason he'd accepted the assignment at all was because he understood full well the implications of THRUSH's latest apparent scientific breakthrough.

Sensing his friend's emotional turmoil, Illya kept his voice low. "The Air Roma check-in station is just down this concourse, Napoleon. I do believe I see Elisabeth waiting at one of the desks. Yes, right down there. Smile, now. Be charming."

"I feel about as charming as a misanthrope with a liver condition."

The agents walked along the busy concourse. They had only gone half the distance to the large Air Roma check-in lounge when Elisabeth d'Angelo completed her turn and was waved through the chrome-railed aisle into the lounge proper by the smiling man at the desk.

Elisabeth acted as though she was in a hurry. She clutched the tiny pillbox hat to her head with one hand, carried a small overnight case in the other. She wore a smartly tailored suit which did justice to her figure. As Solo watched her cross the lounge, he noticed that a white dress scarf wrapped around her throat and thrust down into the V neck of her jacket.

Two things struck him—a memory of the peculiar double marks on Ffolkes-Pryce's throat, and an awareness that although Elisabeth seemed to be hurrying at first glance, she was not in fact moving very rapidly across the terrazzo floor. Her step was uncertain, faltering. Several of the other passengers in the lounge looked up and lifted their eyebrows.

"She walks like she's drugged," Solo whispered.

Illya said, "And she's going aboard with someone. I swear I've seen that ugly face before."

Solo jerked himself back to reality. He saw Elisabeth—rather, the back of her—over by the entrance to the covered walkway which extended out to the boarding hatch of the big Air Roma jet parked on the concrete in the rain. Just beyond Elisabeth, smiling and bowing to her in greeting, was a man of large, rangy build. He smiled a great flashing white smile from positively the ugliest face Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

The man's hair was dark, neatly combed and worn long, down about his ears and neck. He carried a black topcoat over his arm. He wore a fawn gray blazer, dark slacks, white silk shirt with a colorful ascot. The deeply-tanned man exuded an air of wealth.

But the most startling feature was his face—a square, long-jawed face. In the center a huge Cyrano nose thrust out, looking as though it had been broken several times and had not knit quite straight. His eyes were dark, intense. His brows hung out over them like cliffs of thick hair. And his eyes were strangely powerful.

The man took Elisabeth's travel case from her with a courtly little bow. While he did this, his eyes swept the lounge, searching. They lit on Solo and Illya a moment. Solo thought the man stiffened. Otherwise there was no sign of recognition.

The man bent down from his impressive height to whisper something in Elisabeth's ear. They vanished down inside the covered boarding walk.

Like the after-image of a snuffed-out candle, the man's misshapen features danced in Solo's mind. That image tantalized him.

As Illya had suggested, the face was more than a little familiar. But Solo couldn't place it. The face, the man's presence, his possessive attitude toward Elisabeth filled Solo with a sense of foreboding, though. He pounded his brains, trying to remember—

An ugly face. An ugly face and a brilliant smile. A face which, for all its vague echoes of brutality, nevertheless exuded a certain power or charm—*where had he seen it?*

"Gentlemen?" inquired a voice in accented English. "Your tickets?"

Solo hardly heard the comments of the gatemen as he and Illya checked through. He kept staring at the plate glass, out to the big silver machine crouched on the concrete. The plane had a stylized decoration on its nose—twin boys in togas, with a wolf hovering in the background.

Romulus and Remus, the mythical twins who had founded the city of Rome. Somehow the painted wolf symbol reminded Solo of the man who had taken Elisabeth's elbow. Savage, primitive, dangerous—

"I'm still trying to remember who he is," Illya said as they proceeded across the lounge. "I'm sure I have seen his picture in the newsmagazines recently."

"A European," Solo said. "Very wealthy. The playboy bit. But there's more. Nobility?"

The snap of Illya's fingers turned heads. "That's it! The racing driver. A millionaire many times over. His father came from the part of Europe that used to be Transylvania. Made a fortune in hides and fats and, some said, munitions. Count Beladrac."

Now it fell in place. "Lugo Beladrac. Count-em-up Lugo, the gossip columns call him." His state of mind took another turn for the worse.

The Count was a Grand Prix car

owner and driver who took terrible chances to win. He had a reputation for getting drunk in public and totalling up, in a loud voice, the number of drivers he'd forced off the tracks of the Continent.

Count-em-up was also a reference also to Beladrac's legendary luck with women. Supposedly they rained from the skies into his lap.

His driving abilities, his money, and oddly enough, his sinister ugliness attracted women by the dozens. Beladrac had a reputation for throwing girl friends away as another man would discard a banana peel. How had Elisabeth gotten involved with *him?*

As they walked toward the boarding ramp Illya remarked, "You know, Napoleon, I recall something else now. Once, oh, three or four years ago, there was an affair in Hungary—an informer died before he could tell very much, but he intimated that Beladrac was one of THRUSH's top agents in Europe. Because THRUSH wished to protect Beladrac's cover—playboy and so forth—he was only called in for very important assignments."

An unpleasant little knot formed in Solo's stomach. "I remember that too. Nothing else ever surfaced concerning Beladrac. Our uncle didn't pay much further attention because of the lack of follow-up proof. Maybe they really were saving the count for something important. Something like—Elisabeth."

Illya shrugged. "A man is innocent until proved guilty. But let's be on guard, all the same. Frankly I wouldn't mind a chance to smash him. That ugly mug repels me."

"I wish it did the same for Elisabeth," Solo said as they moved along the covered ramp. Overhead the rain drummed dismally. "Unfortunately it doesn't look that way."

THREE

A BUXOM stewardess with Air Roma wings on her blouse greeted them at the entrance to the aircraft. Glancing at their tickets, she pointed. "The first class section, immediately inside. Numbers eight and ten on your right."

The agents ducked under the low door and turned down the aisle, Solo leading. He saw that Elisabeth had already taken her place next to a window on the starboard side. Count Lugo Beladrac was standing in the aisle, pulling down a blanket from the rack above the seats. The combination of rain outside and air whistling through the interior ventilators made the cabin quite chilly.

"Excuse me," Solo said pointedly, blocked by the count in the aisle.

Beladrac's massive head swung around. His eyes, deep-set and dark-brown, held a commanding intensity. But they looked out on the rest of the world as though it were made of dung: "In a moment,

in a moment, my man. Wait your turn." Beladrac spoke accented English.

"While you're doing the porter's chores," Solo said with a forced grin, "I'll carry on with the social amenities. Excuse me?"

He pushed Beladrac's left elbow up out of the way, ducked under it and dropped into the seat alongside Elisabeth. Her amber eyes turned toward him, beautiful but curiously dull. At last she recognized him.

"Napoleon! What on earth—?"

"Elisabeth!" It was excruciating for Solo to keep the surprised tone in his voice, the playful smile on his face. Up close, she looked fatigued, hollow-eyed. She had lost considerable weight. He glanced at the white scarf high around her throat and suppressed a shudder. "I thought I saw you back there in the boarding area. I was right. What a treat!"

Elisabeth glanced past him, to where Solo's fellow agent stood alongside a glowering count. "And Illya's with you! Why, that's delightful!" Her smile was wan.

Down near Elisabeth's crossed ankles, Solo noticed her little travel case. Lined with steel, no doubt. And carefully, secretly compartmentalized to contain the tapes and microfilm spools she was carrying to the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference. Its lock looked flimsy, but Solo recognized the particular patina of the brass plating and the lock's heart shape. Capable of being opened only by a three-prong key, the incredibly durable cases were frequently carried by female U.N.C.L.E. couriers.

Solo glanced back to Elisabeth's face, ignoring Beladrac's loud breathing at his elbow. "I assume you're on business, Elisabeth?"

She fought back a yawn. "A little errand for that relative—" She blinked. He'd never seen her less quick. "My uncle—"

A nod from Solo. "Illya and I are heading on east from Rome." Solo fabricated that bit because he felt it would be imprudent to give Elisabeth's traveling companion any information. He needn't have worried. The traveling companion was more interested in giving him information, as Solo discovered when a powerful hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Your American lack of good manners is only exceeded by your other offensive qualities, *signor*. Be so good as to vacate my seat."

The count squeezed down hard on Solo's shoulder, increasing the pressure. Pain sprang up along Solo's arm as he tapped the hairy back of the count's hand with his index finger. "Be so good as to get your paw off my suit. The press isn't that permanent, you know."

The count kept the pressure on for another second or so. The pain got really bad. Solo's temper reddened to the point where he was ready to strike out, smash that im-

mensely ugly face. Then, abruptly, Beladrac let go.

That huge white smile, incongruous in the ugly face, flopped into place. Beladrac took off his expensive Tyrolean hat and turned the brim in his fingers, staring right past Solo at Elisabeth:

"Out of courtesy to you, darling, we won't have a scene. I take it these clods are friends?"

"Yes, we know each other," Elisabeth faltered. "Lugo, this is Napoleon Solo. That's Illya Kuryakin across the aisle. This is Count Lugo Beladrac, my—my fiance."

Solo tried to keep his face a blank, but his stomach was churning. "Well, Elisabeth. I didn't know you believed in short engagements. Or do you?" He indicated her left hand. The spot where normally a ring would be worn was bare.

Count Beladrac laughed. "We plan to take care of the formalities when Elisabeth concludes her dreary business in Rome. She won't tell me what it is, apart from some vague references to governmental work. For my part, I am just as happy not to know. Bourgeois pursuits bore me. I intend to take Elisabeth off to my villa. There she will select her own engagement stone from the jewel chest which has belonged to the Beladrac family for seven centuries. I suppose you cannot comprehend such a procedure, can you, *signor*? The American five-and-ten-cent-store mentality at work—"

That tore it. Solo rocketed up out of the seat, his fist balling. Illya leaped into the aisle. The stewardess, approaching with a sheaf of gold-embossed menus, put a hand to her throat and gasped.

Elisabeth threw off her strange lethargy and caught Solo's hand, restraining it. Count Beladrac's face was quite close to Solo's, the ugly countenance lit by a malicious expression which acknowledged a

new, secret understanding between them.

Elisabeth said in a strained voice: "Please, Napoleon. Please. For my sake, don't—"

Fighting for control, Solo shrugged. "Okay. You must have met him in a zoo, but—"

Beladrac chuckled again. "On the contrary. Elisabeth drives a little sports car, you know. I was spending some time with guests on Long Island. We met at a dreadfully boring little rally. Does that satisfy your craving for gossip, Mr. —ah—Solo?"

And Beladrac stared him down with a stare that said, *I know who you are.* Or was Solo misinterpreting?

Angered, not a little displeased with himself, Solo wondered whether Beladrac was merely a boor whom Elisabeth, in paradoxical feminine fashion, had fallen for, or whether there was some other, more sinister connection. He sighed, forced another smile, lifted himself from Beladrac's seat.

Beladrac stepped forward to claim it. Solo turned his back and bent over Elisabeth. He patted her cheek, managing to shield his movements from the count as he hooked his little finger under the edge of her scarf and lifted it for the shortest part of a second. He murmured something polite and inane to cover the gesture—

There were no marks on Elisabeth's neck.

Elisabeth didn't even notice his little stratagem because her senses were so dulled. Solo saw that in her eyes, in the way she blinked once and slowly pushed her pink mouth into a smile. "Napoleon, it's kind of you—I don't know what to say, except—" Lost, she faltered, stopped.

"Have a nice flight, Elisabeth." Solo drew his hand away.

Beladrac flashed him another glare. "We shall, if you don't force further conversation on us."

With the smell of danger rising in his nostrils, Solo crawled across Illya's knees and dropped into the seat beside the window.

Count Beladrac hitched himself around in his seat. He faced Elisabeth, so that his back shielded her from the agents across the aisle. The stewardess walked through, checking on fastened seatbelts. The hatchways slammed shut. The boarding ramp telescoped away from the side of the huge four-engine jet. Rain beat on the wings. The pilot started the engines one at a time.

The Air Roma plane began to taxi. The noise level had increased to the point where Solo felt safe whispering to Illya: "Something's wrong with her, right enough. Very wrong."

Across the aisle, the count burst out with a laugh. Illya said, "And the cause might be a little bird, eh?"

"Yes. A thrush. We may have

walked into some nasty trouble. I had the distinct impression that the count knows who we are and what we represent."

"Rome will tell." Illya closed his eyes. "Meantime, if you'll permit me—"

And in almost seconds he dropped off to sleep.

Solo chewed his thumb. He watched the runway slide by slowly under the wings. Within a few more seconds the great plane lifted into the rain and headed out over the Atlantic.

FOUR

On the speaker system, the stewardess announced in Italian that the Air Roma jet would be landing in the Eternal City in just a few minutes. Captain Rizzolo had already commenced his descent, and would the ladies and gentlemen kindly refrain from smoking as soon as the multi-lingual warning signs flashed on?

The stewardess then repeated her information in English. Napoleon Solo gestured, trying to get Elisabeth's attention. The girl's sandy-gold hair gleamed with a lovely luster in the glow of the tiny reading spotlight shining down from above her. The seat beside her was vacant. The count had excused himself a few moments ago. Solo and Illya had exchanged places earlier.

Solo reached across the aisle. "Elisabeth? Elisabeth, I'd like to say—"

"No use," Illya interrupted. "The poor girl must be exhausted. She's asleep."

Little tension lines formed around Solo's mouth. This appeared to be the case. Elisabeth swayed ever so gently from side to side in her seat, her body stirred by the vibration of the great jet engines through metal of the fuselage.

What damnable drug was already in her body, reducing her from the lively, quick-witted creature he'd known to the kind of limp hulk he watched now? Solo started to thrust up out of his seat. Perhaps if he slipped over beside her, he could wake her. This was his only opportunity. Beladrac hadn't left the cabin until just moments ago. He moved in her direction—

A soft clicking to his left caught Solo's attention. A flame glared. Solo turned, knowing he'd been discovered. He recovered his aplomb, smoothed his tie as the count emerged from the first class lavatory.

The count tossed and caught the massive, gold filigree lighter with which he'd lit his cigarette. He strode down the aisle, moved into his seat to block Solo's view of the girl again.

"Of course you were just getting up to use the facilities, eh?" the count inquired mockingly.

"Of course," Solo murmured. Fuming, he walked up the aisle.

He stepped inside the tiny cubicle, latched the door. An idea had suggested itself. He pulled out his pocket communicator. He adjusted the calibrations so that the device would not interfere with any of the communications instruments aboard the aircraft. He called for Channel D to open.

Mr. Waverly was out of headquarters for the evening. Did agent Solo wish him contacted? No, Solo merely wanted to be put through to the duty officer in Identifications.

In a moment he was in contact, asking that the computers check their voluminous memories concerning the count and THRUSH. The very quickness with which the duty officer replied indicated a negative check:

"Code condition blue forty-ought, Mr. Solo. That's—"

"—an indication of a possible connection only."

"Correct, sir. Nothing at all definite."

Solo said thanks and switched off. Perhaps he was letting jealousy foul him. It was true that after the initial rumors a few years ago, nothing else had connected the count to the supra-nation. Perhaps the informer who mentioned the count's name had some personal grudge, and decided to settle it as best he could before dying. Such things had happened.

Puzzled and uncertain about his next step, Solo returned to his seat. He noticed as he sat down that Elisabeth had wakened. She gave a listless smile.

"Napoleon, I'm sorry we won't —" She faltered. She brushed at her forehead. Beladrac looked bland for a change, as though he didn't notice. "—won't have a chance to have dinner in Rome."

"I am too, Elisabeth. Though I'm sure the count wouldn't enjoy it."

"Quite right, *signor*."

Lugo Beladrac treated Napoleon Solo to one of those full-toothed, insulting white grins that broke his incredibly ugly face into a webwork of wrinkles.

Solo's pulse hammered with anger. He sat down, wondered how high his blood pressure had shot. Waverly would discipline him if he tore into Beladrac merely because the man was boorish and insulting. Yet what satisfaction it would give him. What intense satisfaction!

Soon the *no smoking* signs lit, and the great jetliner drifted gently downward toward the lights of Rome spread across the seven hills and for miles into the distance. The jet swooped in for its landing.

As soon as the stewardess unfastened the hatch, Count Beladrac took Elisabeth's arm and steadied her out into the aisle. The count shoved a couple of other passengers rather rudely, with the result that he and Elisabeth were the second couple to leave the first class section. Solo went to claim his topcoat, his mind flashing with an im-

age of Elisabeth's little travel bag bobbing, bobbing in her gloved right hand as she walked off the plane.

Normally quick to follow his friend, Illya Kuryakin had remained in his seat by the window. He hunched far back, so that he could not be easily seen from outside. Then, abruptly, Illya jumped up.

"I waited to watch the count going into the terminal, Napoleon. He used that heavy gold lighter again."

Irritable and tired from the long trip, Solo said, "What's so unusual about that?"

"Oh, nothing, apart from the fact that he didn't have a cigarette in his mouth. Count Beladrac appeared to be holding the lighter close to his face, examining it. Or talking into it. We'd best be careful."

"And we'd better hurry up about it. I want to follow them."

"There's no evidence that our friend is—from the birds. Just your hunch."

As they stepped from the plane and clattered down the metal stairs, Solo affirmed that this was correct. Quickly he told Illya about the talk with New York, the negative report.

"But I still think he knew who we were. I mean, what organization we represent. It could be just coincidence, his traveling with Elisabeth. And yet—"

"I sense that the green devils of envy are stoking the fires of your imagination, Napoleon."

"It may be that, all right. But it won't hurt to tag after them. Elisabeth's too foggy to notice. And if Beladrac's a professional, he'll notice right away. If he doesn't, then we can cross him off and look for threats against Elisabeth from some other quarter."

By now they had entered the terminal proper. Italian officials waited to check their papers and luggage. Across the brightly-lit chamber, the count and Elisabeth were just completing the formalities, claiming their luggage and heading out along the concourse, presumably toward the motor park.

Fortunately the authorities only took a few moments to clear the agents. Solo risked using his U.N.C.L.E. identification to speed things along.

"This way," Solo called, heading left along the clattering concourse. "We'll get the bags later." He broke into a half run. Elisabeth and the count were disappearing in the crowd ahead.

Solo and Illya fought their way through the throng, murmuring apologies in English and Italian. They had gone perhaps a dozen yards when they spotted a strange-looking group coming toward them —a man, his wife, and two youngsters of a size to be perhaps eight or nine.

The man wore a cheap suit and

a red lodge fez. The woman carried a straw bag full of souvenirs, was thin-faced and hard-eyed. The children, a boy and a girl, dogged after them. The boy scuffed along with his head down, his face concealed by a child's fedora. The girl wore a straw picture hat which likewise hid her face.

The man, beefy and red nosed, angled toward Solo with one hand gripped around an expensive camera on a leather neck strap. Illya tried to dodge. The tourists were quicker, cutting them off:

"Why, hello there! It's Cousin Eustis from the States!" cried the man, seizing Solo's arm and shoving him back against the concourse wall. The man's breath smelled of garlic but he spoke with all the perfection of an American from the midwest.

"Cousin Eustis and his friend," said the woman, crowding in on one side of Illya. Her eyes were stone-bright.

The children were out of sight behind their parents. A few Italians passing glanced at the loud-mouthed family distastefully. Otherwise the people paid no attention.

"I'm not your cousin, you simpleton," Solo fumed. "Get out of my way and—"

He saw the man's hand rise toward the lens barrel of the camera, touch what looked like the shutter release. A cloud of purple gas squirted from a tiny hole in the lens cap. Solo reacted instantly and drove backwards against Illya with a warning shout.

Illya was knocked off balance. Solo righted himself, catching a whiff of the purplish gas. A choking nauseous feeling rose in his throat. Something came winking at him from the right.

He whirled. The woman's stiletto, evidently drawn from her phoney tourist handbag, stabbed at his throat like a glittering needle. Solo caught the woman's wrist. He deflected the blow but the blades' needle tip nearly hit his left cheek anyway.

Illya, meantime, was having troubles of his own.

The two children swarmed around his legs. From under a shawl she carried, the girl produced a small nickeled pistol which she pointed at Illya's midsection. He batted her arm. In doing so, his elbow caught the brim of the little boy's junior-size fedora. The hat flicked off—

The bogus boy raised a tough, leathery, middle-aged midget's face. A gun flashed in his hand. The phony father maneuvered to give Solo another squirt of the gas. Solo squeezed the woman's wrist. She dropped the knife.

The disguised midgets—the girl's hat had come off in the struggle; she had a tough, runty little harridan's face too—caught Illya between them. He dropped flat just as the pair of pistols went off.

Someone in the crowd screamed and fell. Solo shoved the woman away from him so hard that she stumbled. The bogus father used the opportunity to grab Solo's shoulder, spin him around and release a blast of gas in his face. The gas caught him full in the nose, making his lungs vibrate with pain. He groped for the man with the camera.

The man danced backward, snarling low: "One dose of that stuff, *signor,* and your uncle will be seeking a new nephew."

Solo's lungs burned. The midgets were trying to elude Illya. He was scrambling across the floor, trying to catch them by their ankles. A large crowd was gathering, though people seemed uncertain whether the fight was genuine, or some sort of a movie stunt, because of the bizarre presence of the dwarfs.

The false father called out sharply in Italian. The midgets scuttled away after him through the crowd.

On his knees with everything turning and whirling around him, Solo heard Illya say: "Napoleon, if that gas is lethal we must find a doctor."

"You get after Elisabeth. Don't lose her."

Solo lifted his head. His eyes blazed a moment, fierce, hard with the force of his command. "Do it, Illya, Elisabeth is the one who matters now."

He didn't have to explain to Illya that she mattered because this attempted assassination proved beyond all doubt that Beladrac worked for THRUSH, and had called in helpers to do away with the agents because he had recognized them.

Excited voices babbled in Italian all around them. Illya Kuryakin hesitated. "Napoleon, I can't leave. The gas may be—"

"Get after her!" Solo shouted. Professionalism won. Illya stood up. He turned and dashed away.

This could be it, Solo thought. His eyes watered. Faces, bodies pressing in around him were vague smears rather than clearly defined things. His lungs burned and burned. He lurched to his feet. He

swayed like a drunken man, his hair unkempt, his suit a mess. A portly woman at the edge of the crowd moaned and crossed herself. Air. That's what he needed. It was air—

Solo's vision dimmed even more. He wondered how far into his system the lethal gas had worked. He charged at the crowd like a blinded bull. People scattered. Ahead, Solo made out the chromium rails encircling another lounge area, this one deserted. He stumbled against the railing, slid to his knees.

Panting, he rested his cheek against the cool metal. Far away, he recognized the Italian words someone was shouting They were calling for the nearest policeman.

Napoleon Solo gathered up all the strength he had left and dragged himself betwen the rails into the lounge. He picked up one of the plastic chairs. It seemed to weigh heavy as all the earth. He smashed the chair against the plate glass window of the lounge.

The glass exploded outward. Solo lurched forward again, stepped across the upthrusting points of glass still in the frame and fell forward. His cheek slid in a patch of oil as he came to rest on the concrete, belly down.

He sucked in great hungry gulps of night air tainted with the stink of airplane fuel. Everything darkened— Wondering if he'd ever wake again, he blacked out completely.

FIVE

ILLYA KURYAKIN ran like a madman, and a madman without manners at that. He thrust men and women aside bodily in his wild race to the main doors which led to the motor park. A policeman approached on the left, jabbering at him and waving a wand, ordering him to stop.

Quickly Illya dodged around an old gentleman, circled a woman carrying a baby, plunged through the double set of glass doors. Taxi men beckoned him. He ignored them, racing to the parking area.

Down one of the ranks of parked vehicles, an impressive pale gray Rolls-Royce was backing out of its slot. As the car backed around, Illya saw sandy-gold hair flash briefly in the rear window.

Bent double below the rear window sight line, Illya ran as he'd seldom run before. He caught up to the Rolls just as it completed its backing maneuver. At the instant the driver shifted gears forward, Illya stepped onto the bumper with his right shoe. The Rolls slid forward. Illya dragged his left shoe up while his fingers found uneasy purchase above.

The Rolls gathered speed. Right away he knew he couldn't hang on for long. He'd caught them. But it would be an empty victory when he fell off onto the pavement in a few more seconds. His fingers were slipping, slipping already—

ACT II

GRAND PRIX OF DEATH

THE ROLLS GLIDED down the aisle between parked vehicles. A pair of lovers kissing in an open Fiat convertible sat up and pointed. No doubt he looked ridiculous, Illya thought, attempting to cling to the rear end of the large luxury car. He felt ridiculous, doubly so when he realized that the occupants of the Rolls must have seen the startled expressions and the gestures of the boy and girl in the Fiat.

Just as the Rolls reached the last cars parked in the rank and started its left turn into the exit lane, the driver hit the brake pedal. Illya's skull bounced against metal in the center of the drive.

From the oval rear window of the Rolls Elisabeth looked out at him. He wasn't sure she recognized him. The left front and right rear doors of the car snapped open. A burly chauffeur jumped from up front.

Beladrac, an impressive pistol in one fist, hopped out of the tonneau. Illya scrambled up. The chauffeur bore in. Illya's right fist punched deep and hard into the chauffeur's midsection. The man went *ooomph* and doubled. Illya knee-lifted him under the chin, thrust him away, just as Beladrac's ugly face loomed around to his right.

Illya whirled, tried to raise his arm to block the chopping pistol-blow the count was smashing down onto his head. Beladrac used his free hand to seize Illya's wrist, twist his guard aside. Then the count crashed the muzzle against Illya's temple.

Falling, Illya heard the count cry in a loud voice, "That will teach you, vermin! The young lady may have been your girl friend last week, but she now prefers a nobleman to a penniless student. Your insane antics won't change that."

The chauffeur had Illya by the throat now, throttling him while the count continued his declamation for the benefit of the startled lovers in the Fiat. "Come, come, fellow! We'll take you home to your nasty little flat. You can sober up there."

Illya was by now lying on the ground. Beladrac hissed at the chauffeur: "Get the needle into his arm, you—" A string of Italian obscenities here.

Writhing, Illya Kuryakin hit at the chauffeur's face, missed. Beladrac stepped on his midsection. Something silver-cool and sharp pricked through the fabric of his coat. He tried to roll away from it.

Beladrac laughed, booted him in the side of the head, then gave forth with another small oration about the viciousness of the lower classes.

Illya was dizzy. A strange lassitude accompanied the dizziness. He tried to punch at the chauffeur again. His muscles seemed to be operating in slow motion. Finally

his knuckles connected with the chauffeur's chin, grazing it, but it felt as though he'd smacked cotton-candy instead of something solid.

His adversaries gave him room. Illya flopped over on his side. He stuck his hand out toward the bumper of the Rolls-Royce. It seemed to recede from him like a planet whirling away through immense spaces.

At last he caught hold of the metal. He got his other hand on the bumper too. In that way he dragged himself forward to where he could push himself up, stand goggling at the lights of the motor park that whirled and blurred like speeding comets.

Against the backdrop of the lights and the night sky Illya saw the looming immensity of Count Lugo Beladrac's ugly face. The count's teeth shone like mirrors. In the depths of his eyes, hatred flickered.

"All right, clod. If you can walk, get yourself in the car. We'll drive you home."

Dimly seen past the count's shoulder, the young couple from the Fiat watched curiously. Illya held out his hands to them. He shouted with the full strength of his lungs that he was being dragged into a trap, that the count was going to take him away and kill him.

No sound came from his throat. His mouth worked in silence. Sweat popped out on his forehead. He began to shudder as the drug that had been injected into his bloodstream worked its full effect. Suddenly his legs betrayed him. He sprawled on the concrete, seized by violent convulsions.

Beladrac laughed coldly somewhere. The chauffeur seized Illya by the armpits, dragged him up to the front of the Rolls-Royce, opened the door and folded him onto the floorboards of the front seat.

As the auto gathered speed, sweeping out of the motor park, Illya heard a voice he recognized as Elisabeth's murmur dazedly from the back seat: "What—what's wrong with Mr. Kuryakin, Lugo?"

"Probably a touch of air sickness, my dear."

"Yes, but why was he following us? Why was he attacking you?"

"Oh, no doubt something to do with that fellow Napoleon Solo's insane jealousy. Don't fret over it."

"I don't understand." Elisabeth sounded terribly foggy, uncertain of the very words she said. "Lord, I wish I could rest. I'm so tired—"

Count Beladrac's voice dropped to a low, soothing note: "Shortly, my dearest. It's been a tiring trip. I'll see that you have the proper chance to gether your strength before you do—ah—whatever it is you must do here in Rome."

Teetering on the brink of consciousness, Illya thought one word wildly—*Liar!*

Count Lugo Baladrac knew full

well what Elisabeth's mission was in Rome. Illya was convinced of it now. And just as obviously Elisabeth couldn't properly interpret what had just happened because of her weakened condition.

From the rear seat drifted an intermingling of voices, Beladrac's urging her to put her head down on his shoulder and rest, Elisabeth's drowzily protesting that she couldn't fathom why Illya Kuryakin would be pursuing the count's car, would be trying to start a fight with the count, or why the count had taken Illya along—

"But, my dear," the count said softly, "we couldn't leave him lying there, could we?"

"N—no, I suppose not. But what will you—"

"Drop him at a hotel, naturally. Find him a room where he can sleep it off. Then we'll be free to go about our own affairs, you and I." Beladrac's voice dropped lower, whispering words which sounded sickeningly, cloyingly affectionate.

Illya knew he couldn't stay awake much longer. It was a fight, just lying there half paralyzed, trying to stay awake and listen. Plainly Elisabeth didn't know about Count Beladrac's connection with THRUSH.

Still, she was not as yet completely under the influence of THRUSH's newest drug. Illya heard her protesting softly again. "Lugo darling, these friends of mine, Napoleon and Illya, wouldn't attack anyone because of jealousy. It isn't like them."

"You mustn't trouble your head about it, my dear."

"Is Illya awake? Let me talk to him, Lugo."

Desperately Illya tried to make a sound. His throat felt clogged, wooden. The chauffeur moved his left boot over so that it was resting on Illya's temple, pressing his head to the mat much harder than was necessary.

The chauffeur said, "The foreigner is sleeping, *signorina.*"

"I just can't think quite right," came Elisabeth's plaintive voice. "These past few weeks I don't know what's come over me. If I could only concentrate—Lugo, perhaps Illya's sick. Perhaps he really needs help. Should we get him to a doctor?" Her breathing was labored. Long pauses punctuated each few words she spoke.

You're the one who needs help, Elisabeth, Illya's mind screamed silently.

Elisabeth's voice faded away to a sleepy protest. The motor of the Rolls-Royce hummed whisper-quiet. Illya lost track of time.

Perhaps he'd been out for a few seconds. Or several minutes. At any rate, he caught a fragment of the chauffeur's sentence: "—shall I proceed as we're going, Excellence?"

"Naturally not, you cabbage. And not so loud! The girl has

dropped off. Wretched little fool, to think that I could be seriously interested in her. These Americans have such terrible egos. When they join U.N.C.L.E., it becomes far worse. Well, we shall prick their little bubble soon enough. Take the next turn-around. Phone the airfield to have the plane ready. We'll take off immediately for Nice. We can carry that U.N.C.L.E. agent in the baggage space. We'll keep him out of sight from *Signorina* d'Angelo. Of course our story will be that we did deliver him to his hotel. Are you quite clear on that?"

"Perfectly, Excellence."

All this Illya Kuryakin half heard, lying with his cheek against the ridged matting on the floor of the front seat. The convulsions began again. His fingertips turned cold, seemed to be full of tiny needles. The humming of the Rolls motor increased to a piercing whine. Illya knew it was all in his head. Solo's face flashed into his thoughts.

Was Napoleon dead? Had the lethal gas that squirted from the camera of the bogus tourist finished him? Illya hoped desperately that it wasn't so. Napoleon remained the only hope now.

He tried to move one last time. Consuming weariness overcame him. The struggle against the injection became too much. Somewhere far away he heard Count Beladrac humming a cheerful Italian folk-melody.

The car swung in a long curve, heading back the way it had come.

TWO

NAPOLEON SOLO was just about half alive. At least he felt that way.

Dawn was just breaking as the taxi deposited him in front of the luxurious Hotel Penti in downtown Rome. Solo's whole frame shook with an annoying ague. It had been with him ever since he awakened around midnight in the charity ward where he had been taken by the police. They had dragged him off the tarmac at the airfield and into an ambulance.

At least that was the way it was explained to him. He had no recollection of anything until he woke in a clean bed with a hellish ache in his midsection—his stomach had been pumped repeatedly—and the ague shaking him from end to end.

He spent the rest of the night alternately receiving injections and oral medication from a team of doc-

tors and arguing with a rotund, mustached inspector of the metropolitan police who turned up at his bedside around one.

Fortunately Solo still had his identification with him, and his pocket communicator. The inspector spoke, in uncertain English, with Mr. Alexander Waverly in New York. Mr. Waverly vouched for Solo. The chief of Policy and Operations was circumspect, however. He told the inspector nothing of Solo's assignment, only that he must be given all necessary medical attention and released as quickly as possible.

This galled the policeman. But a phone call moments later from the inspector's superior, whom Waverly had also contacted, silenced his protests effectively. Solo was spared the burden of answering questions, though he did ask the inspector a few.

He learned that the bogus tourists had gotten clean away in the confusion following the attack. And only Solo's last-ditch effort to smash outside into the fresh air had saved his own life. Had he not gotten outside, the doctors asserted, he would not have lived long enough for them to take the vital, necessary measures to pull him precariously back to life.

"And in your condition," said one of the physicians, "it is imperative that you rest for at least three days, *signor*."

"Send a nurse for my clothes," Solo countered. "I've got to get out of here."

"But that is impossible! In addition, it is potential suicide!"

"Where are my clothes?"

"You cannot!" insisted the doctor. "The after-effects of that particular gas are extremely debilitating, and could result in loss of—"

"Never mind." Solo stuck his legs out of bed. He stood up. He nearly pitched forward on his face. Cold sweat popped out all over his cheeks as he took a lurching step. "I'll find my things myself."

With practically the entire staff of the hospital washing their hands of further responsibility, Napoleon Solo teetered out into the light of false dawn. The waiting taxi deposited him in front of the Penti.

The hotel's glass high-rise front caught the first shafts of sunlight from the east. The doorman, elegant in gold braid and a peaked cap, studiously studied his shoe tips and permitted Solo to open the main door himself. With his clothes a mess and his beard sprouting, Solo hardly fitted in with the clientele to whom the Penti catered—film stars, magnates, diplomats.

Solo crossed the lobby, teeth chattering from the chill. He thought about Illya Kuryakin. He wondered what had happened to him.

And Elisabeth and Beladrac, where had they gone? Elisabeth was due to register here at the Pen-

ti, where the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference was being held. Solo approached a clerk in fawn-gray morning coat who stood behind the registration desk.

He asked for the room number of Laszlo Prentiss. With some reluctance, but obviously unwilling to argue with the glare in Solo's eyes, the clerk told him.

Moments later, Solo pounded on the door of a room on the eighth floor. "Prentiss? Open up!"

"Hullo? What? Who is it? Oh, hang on. I'm coming."

The door was opened by a gangling, yawning fellow with a lantern jaw and an untidy mop of red hair going gray at the temples. The man scratched his belly under his pajamas, blinked.

"Napoleon! We'd given you up for lost. What the devil happened to you?"

Solo thrust past the gangling man into the dim room. "If you've got any brandy I'll tell you."

Laszlo Prentiss was one of the Section II operatives assigned to the U.N.C.L.E. station in Rome. He shut and bolted the door, flicked on a desk lamp. Solo, meantime, had already spotted the cognac and was pouring a healthy glassful from the heavy decanter.

He sloshed it down. Ordinarily he was against operatives drinking heavily while on assignment. It dulled the mind and often made the difference between the correct, instantaneous response to danger and the wrong, delayed one. This morning, though, with the after-effects of the noxious gas seething through his system, he needed something to keep him from falling over on his face. The whole affair was crumbling apart. The smell of disaster was ripe in his nostrils.

Laszlo Prentiss stood with hands in the pocket of his bathrobe as Solo sketched in some of the details of what was happening. Solo didn't spell out the exact nature of the latest THRUSH threat. The fewer field operatives who knew about the possibility of massive drug-induced treachery in the ranks, the better. He did intimate that THRUSH was hatching a potentially disastrous scheme to gain control of the organization, and that Elisabeth was one of the possible guinea pigs for the operation.

Prentiss clucked his tongue at this. "Don't know a thing about that, old chap. I was merely assigned to look after her once she got here. I checked into the Penti last Monday, when the conference began. Then, around dinner time last evening, Waverly called in on Channel F. He was cryptic. Said you and Kuryakin were on the way. That we should extend every cooperation, etcetera. I stayed awake half the night awaiting a phone call, either from Elisabeth checking in, or from you and Illya. When neither came, I fell asleep. You don't know where Illya is?"

"Haven't the faintest," Solo re-

plied, his forced lightness hiding his painfully deep concern.

"Well, Miss d'Angelo isn't in the hotel either."

Solo's eyebrows shot up. "Where is she?"

"When she didn't show up according to schedule, I got my little network helpers working. A few thousand lire grease the informational skids quite nicely y'know. Miss d'Angelo telephoned the hotel early last evening. Actually, a man relayed her message. She was leaving Rome for the weekend. Would return and claim her room early Monday morning, when the conference resumes."

Now Solo's belly tightened up. "*Resumes?* It's broken off?"

"Afraid so. Late yesterday. THRUSH has worked its dirty work well. Even those gents at the conference table—cooler types than you'll find in either of the capitols of the two countries involved—are convinced that the delegates from the other side are a pack of charlatans and liars.

"The conference has been foundering for almost a week. Tempers getting short. Yesterday it turned into a real screaming match. Threats of war out in the open. The chairman banged his gavel as soon as I got to him with the news that our uncle was sending an agent with material to prove that all of the trouble has been fomented by THRUSH. The chairman got the delegates to adjourn until Monday morning. It's a very touchy situation. If Miss d'Angelo doesn't show up with the proper information, I'm afraid everything from the Sudan to Suez is going to blow."

Holding the empty tumbler in his hands, Solo paced the thick carpet. "And Elisabeth has gone off somewhere. Been taken, probably. By that damn ugly count."

"Beladrac!" said Prentiss. "You mentioned him before. The sports car driver?"

Solo gave a tight nod. "Rich. Ugly as sin. And probably a top THRUSH agent."

A low whistle from Prentiss. "That last part I didn't know."

"Well, there's a lot I don't know, Laszlo, and some I can't tell you. I do know this. If Elisabeth is with the count, it's not because he gives a hang about her, though she's going around saying they're engaged. And the last I saw of Illya at the airport, he was chasing them."

He went on to fill in more of the details of the attack at the field, including Beladrac's use of his heavy gold filigree lighter as an apparent communications device to summon help.

"Now the question is," Solo finished, "where the devil has the count gone?"

Prentiss thought a moment. "Let's see. He's all over the social pages week after week. I'm sure he has a villa on the Riviera. Saw a picture spread on it recently. Posh place. And wasn't there something

written up about sports car trials in Monte Carlo this weekend? I'll check."

Prentiss streaked for the phone. Moments later he put the receiver back on its prongs.

"One of our fellows is going out to the airport to look into it right now. He'll phone back as soon as he can. Meantime, how about a shower and some breakfast? Room service should be open. I say, you really do look like the proverbial walking corpse. Are you going to make it?"

The ague still bothered Solo. From time to time piercing pains stabbed his stomach and his temples. He fought them down, pushed them out of his mind. With the affair growing more tangled by the hour, with Elisabeth in Beladrac's hands and Illya gone, Solo couldn't begin to worry about his personal welfare.

"I'll make it, Laszlo. I've got to. Where's the shower?"

THREE

SHORTLY Prentiss' associate telephoned back. Prentiss stuck his head around the bathroom door jamb and yelled at Solo in the steaming shower cabinet.

"Our dear friend the playboy count has a private aircraft which he keeps at the airport. It took off shortly past midnight. The flight plan he filed listed Nice as the destination. There were three passengers, the chauffeur-pilot, the count himself, and a Miss Andrews."

"I'll get a plane," Solo bawled back over the hiss of water.

"Bit of difficulty there, old chap. My associate says the airport is swarming with well-known THRUSH agents."

"Then there isn't much doubt any more that Beladrac is running the operation."

"No," said Prentiss, scratching his chin. "I suppose there isn't. Funny, that. A playboy who fools around motor cars and women. I suppose it is a top notch cover. This one must be something big if he hasn't surfaced until now."

You don't know how big, Solo thought as the hot water needles drove against his skin. He felt a little better. A good substantial breakfast had helped reduce the nausea and pain.

At nine-thirty in the morning a delivery van arrived at the Rome airport with a medium-sized crate marked for a pet shop in Nice. The crate was perforated with air holes. Without incident, the crate was loaded into the freight blister of the mid-morning flight for the Riviera.

Napoleon Solo rode uncomfortably to Nice inside the wooden box which had effectively hoodwinked the THRUSH agents watching the Rome terminal. If things hadn't been so serious, Solo would have barked once or twice in the box for the sake of realism.

FOUR

CLINK-CLANK
Plink-zenk-spang
Hammer, hammer, hammer

Illya Kuryakin listened to the unusual noises as he floated back to consciousness. It sounded as though hand tools were being used to

straighten out a piece of sheet metal, and to adjust reluctantly rusty belts.

Against the background of these tool noises, men conversed. At least three, perhaps more. Illya thought he recognized the voice of Count Beladrac among them. Catching phrases in French and Italian, Illya translated a word here and there.

Magneto.

Supercharger.

Tachometer.

And something about an auto-control. The interchanges sounded oddly professional and cheery.

The last thing Illya remembered was falling into the hands of THRUSH at the Rome airport. How, then, had it come to pass that he was hearing talk which more appropriately belonged in an auto race maintenance pit? Where—

A chilling burst of memory filled in the blurred edges of the mental picture. In addition to being a THRUSH agent of high rank, Count Beladrac drove *grand prix* cars.

"Sssssssh!" someone hissed near at hand. Then, in French: "Excellence, he's waking up."

"So he is," Beladrac's voice responded. "Guilliame, make certain those ropes are secure."

Illya's arms were stretched around behind his back, lashed together at the wrists behind the upright portion of an old wooden chair in which he sat. He opened his eyes. Light blazed in his face. The smell of oil and gasoline drifted into his nostrils.

Tied hand and foot to the chair, Illya was a prisoner in what appeared to be a large auto garage. The walls were lined with parts cabinets and workbenches equipped with sophisticated metal-working tools. Directly ahead of him, Illya saw three gleaming bullet-shaped Formula One driving machines.

The one nearest to him looked the most dilapidated of the lot. Its metal bonnet displayed several deep dents. A mechanic in a greasy coverall was busy stringing wires from holes in the bonnet back to the driver's cockpit. Another me-

chanic was working on the lug nuts of the right rear tire with an air wrench.

This car, a metallic blue, was one Illya recognized as an exceedingly fast American-powered Shelley-Python. Beyond it stood a red Ashworth-Marti. The third car was a blazing yellow Ferrante. Those two were covered with large clear plastic sheets. Only the near vehicle, the Shelley-Python, was being worked on.

The mechanics paused in their work. All of them turned to stare at him. None of them seemed unusually hostile, merely curious, but Illya noted a pistol butt sticking from one man's pocket.

A shadow fell across his knees. Count Beladrac stepped around from behind, towering up against the tin-shaded bulbs which hung from the garage ceiling. The count wore a spotless white coverall. He was smoking a cigarette of gold-wrapped paper in a long ivory holder. As he smiled, his hideous face again displayed that amazing amount of dental ware.

"Good evening, Kuryakin. Glad to see you've come around."

Illya glowered. "I'm not so certain I'm glad. How much of that stuff did you shoot into me?"

"Three doses," Beladrac flicked ash away. "Actually you have been unconscious for nearly twenty-four hours. I thought it more prudent to keep you quiet. We're in the cellar of my home, you see." A gesture at the ceiling. "Just a few miles from Nice. Elisabeth is upstairs at the moment. She's changing for dinner. She doesn't know you're here. I prefer to keep it that way. As soon as my associates have rigged the car and you're off on your little ride, I'll join Elisabeth and she won't be the wiser."

The count bent forward and waved the hot tip of the cigarette beneath Illya's nose. "I would be delighted to have her know and appreciate the fact of your death. On the other hand, I mustn't let personal wishes stand in the way of the entire operation. I must settle for knowing that you are being finished off. Perhaps one day I'll tell her how it happened."

Deep in Illya's belly a cold knot of fear formed.

"I smashed up the Shelley last November at Volkerstone, don't you see?" continued the count. "She'll never race again, except for her last ride in just a few minutes now. As long as we plan to scrap her anyway, it occurred to me that we might employ her as your—"

The count paused. His ugly face looked all the more sadistic because of the toothy smile "—your death-engine, so to speak."

The mechanics were working on the car again. One man in coveralls had his head buried in the cockpit. He used a soldering iron to connect several of the wires which ran back from the bonnet and around the windscreen.

"Then you do work for THRUSH," said Illya.

"Certainly. Miss d'Angelo does not know that. Yet. I am only her ardent suitor as far as she knows."

"You brought her here as part of your plan to sabotage the Peace Conference in Rome."

The count's forehead puckered. "I don't feel I am at liberty to discuss details, Kuryakin. I will say this." He leaned close again, grinning. "U.N.C.L.E. is finished. War is going to start in the middle East very shortly. THRUSH will be there to pick up the pieces. But even more important, we will soon control hundreds of key operatives within U.N.C.L.E. itself. Against that combination of factors, your organization cannot stand."

Beladrac seized Illya's chin and gave it a cruel, neck-snapping twist. "Carry that little thought with you to your death, my friend."

The deep-set eyes turned slightly mad, bright with the hatred Illya had seen too many times before, the fanatic hatred which drove THRUSH on. Beladrac's voice dropped to an insinuating croon.

"Of course it would be much simpler for me to shoot or stab or poison you. But since you eluded the little trap I set for you at the Rome airport, my anger has been piqued. I prefer to have you die in a somewhat more lingering way. Look here."

The count stepped over to the bonnet of the Shelley-Python. He flicked the wires running back to the cockpit.

"My helpers have rigged this little device, which is a signal mechanism interconnecting the auto's controls and the motor. The device will steer the car for a certain amount of time. Then it will fail. It will fail while the car is moving along at top speed on some of the deserted and precipitous back roads near here. How long the device will control the car only my associates and I know. I *could* tell you. But that would spoil your trip. Be assured only that sometime when the car is operating at speed, all systems will go out. What happens then should be delightful, eh? And fitting, you arrogant U.N.C.L.E. swine! *Guilliame!*"

"Ready, Excellence," snapped one of the mechanics hovering by the cockpit.

Beladrac looked at his wrist watch. "Truss him up. The girl will be expecting me."

The mechanics swarmed around Illya. They cut his bonds. Illya punched hard at one of them the moment his hands came free.

The mechanic cursed, reeled back. Another mechanic neck-chopped him. Illya's temples exploded with pain. He slid off the chair, was lifted bodily and hoisted over toward the Shelley-Python's bonnet.

The mechanics rolled him in the air like a rug. They placed him face down on the bonnet. They wrapped

ropes around him, pinning his arms to his sides. His head stuck out past the headlamps. His ankles were lashed to either side of the windscreen.

"What a bizarre and amusing hood ornament you make, Kuryakin," the count chuckled.

"Like all the rest of your counterparts," Illya said wearily, "you're crazy."

"Am I? Personally, I feel this is quite an efficient means of dispensing of a car which I no longer want, and an agent who could hamper my affairs."

The mechanics stepped back. The one known as Guilliame called, "Ready, Excellence."

"Gentlemen," said Beladrac blithely, "start your engine."

One of the mechanics reached into the cockpit. A blasting roar filled the garage. The bonnet began to vibrate ferociously beneath Illya's belly.

Triple exhaust pipes on either side of the bonnet sprayed out hot gases that washed up against Illya's trussed hands. One of the mechanics sprang toward the concrete-block wall dead ahead of the car. The man pulled a toggle switch. There was a massive grinding of machinery. The central portion of the wall slid aside, revealing a steeply inclined macadam driveway leading into the darkness. In the distance, on a much lower level, lights in a city and a harbor twinkled, multi-colored. Illya figured that he'd never had such a depressing view of the Riviera before.

Carrying a small metal control box with three lighted dials, Count Beladrac stepped up alongside the bonnet of the Shelley-Python. The count threw the controls one after another. Illya heard the gears engage with a clash, felt the sports car strain forward, waiting for release.

The count's heavy thumb descended toward a red stud on the faceplate of the box.

"Enjoy your trip, Kuryakin. The car is programed to negotiate all turns it encounters—until, of course, the mechanism fails. Will that be ten, five minutes from now? An hour? You will doubtless amuse yourself worrying and wondering."

And with a final sadistic laugh, the count hit the red stud.

FIVE

LIKE A BULLET shot from a rifle, the Shelley-Python screamed out of the garage and hit the curve of the driveway, bearing left. Illya bounced on the bonnet, his midsection punished by terrific jarring concussions. But the ropes were tightly fastened. He didn't fly off.

The gears shifted automatically as the sports car veered left into a road which fronted a brightly-lit villa. The road angled steeply upward. There was a right turn ahead. Wind blasted Illya in the face. The road rushed at him. The Shelley-

Python took the turn, sliding, starting to climb again.

The car went faster, screaming around the turns, bearing up into the deserted hills that overlooked the light-spangled harbor far below.

Illya's senses deadened with the impact of screaming wind. The programed car negotiated a ninety-degree turn into another road and went howling down a level stretch flat out.

Illya knew the machine must be doing at least one hundred by now. He could feel intense heat from the exhaust pipes on either side of the bonnet.

He pulled against his bonds. They gave only a little. And that was a risky business, too. If he fell off at this speed—

Growing numb, Illya watched the road unreel ahead, dark, flanked by low hills. The Shelley-Python took another right turn, sliding. It went flashing up an S-curve with a thunderous roar.

How long? Illya thought. Sweat formed on his forehead, dried instantly in the punishing wind. *How long before the smash?*

About thirty minutes after the Shelley-Python went roaring out of the driveway of the villa above Nice, a small, dusty Renault with its engine badly out of tune came puttering up the hill from the direction of the city.

The Renault's turn light flashed as it swung into the driveway entrance. The car passed a pair of towering pine trees which flanked the entrance. Somewhere an electrified gong rang clamorously three times.

The two men leaped out from behind the cover of the pine trees and into the path of the Renault. The driver applied the brakes at once. The guards carried machine pistols. Though dressed in nondescript clothing, they bore the all-too-familiar tough and professional look of Thrushmen.

The first guard remained standing in the path of the headlights while the other tapped the window on the driver's side.

The driver rolled down the window. The guard snarled, "What's your business here?"

The man inside the car indicated a large wicker hamper on the seat. He said in smooth French, "I am from the wine shop in Nice. The count telephoned a special order a while ago."

Gesturing with his machine pistol, the guard said, "Open the hamper."

"Gladly, monsieur."

The driver was grateful for his Canadian upbringing. He'd heard and learned French almost as early as English. The hamper lid fell back, revealing several dusty bottles. The guard peered at the bottles for a moment, then shrugged.

Ahead, the driveway took a fork. One branch curved away past the front of the rambling three-

storey pink stucco villa. This branch led to a basement garage whose outer door was closed. The right branch led straight back past the side of the villa to a side entrance where a light gleamed. It was to this right branch which the guard pointed with his gun barrel.

"That's the tradesman's entrance. Ring and someone will take the hamper."

The driver grinned obsequiously. "Of course. But I always go inside a moment. The count gives most generous tips."

The guard thought about that. "Five minutes, no more. We have our orders."

"Certainly, certainly," said Napoleon Solo in a craven tone. He engaged the shift and shot the little car forward down the drive.

Solo's nerves were tight-strung. This was a condition he hadn't expected. Five minutes! How could he get anywhere in that time?

Well, he'd simply have to take the chance, gamble that he could hide out long enough in the house to learn what was happening. He'd worry about the guards when they came after him. In a special pocket of his seedy jacket, the long-muzzled pistol rested reassuringly.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent on station in Nice had met Solo at the airport and arranged for his disguise, which included cheap, thick-soled shoes and a Basque cap. The agent provided the car, the hamper, and the information that Count Lugo Beladrac did patronize a particular wine shop in the city. The shop utilized a car of the same make and color for delivery.

The count, of course, had ordered no wine. But subterfuge, no matter how risky, was necessary if he were to get inside the ostentatious villa and find out what had become of Elisabeth and Illya too, if he weren't already dead.

Following the road map provided, Solo had had no difficulty finding the villa up in the hills. The difficult part began now.

He parked the Renault by the tradesmen's door, climbed out with the hamper. The night air was cool and pine-scented. The stars were high, sharp, bright. Solo rang the ancient bell-twist.

In a moment footsteps thudded inside. The door opened. A swarthy guard in a turtle-neck sweater peered out.

"Delivery for Count Beladrac," Solo said in a whining voice, already half through the door. He was sure the guards down by the road would be watching.

He bumped past the swarthy man, who had a snub-nosed automatic in his right hand. Solo shook the hamper. The bottles clinked faintly. "Wine for the count's dinner."

Beyond the guard, Solo glimpsed a stairway that went up to a closed door. To the left another stairway ran down to what appeared to be a cellar where a single light shone.

"I wasn't aware that the count had phoned down for any wine," the guard said.

"Yes, he did," Solo returned, setting the hamper on the floor. "Special Cordon Mare Red St. Thomas. Half a dozen bottles. Here, if you don't believe me."

Solo opened the hamper. He lifted one of the bottles and turned it as if to show the label. The butt of his left palm pressed the bottom of the opaque bottle. From the foil-covered cork a needle-thin stream of nearly colorless vapor hissed, straight at the guard's nostrils.

The guard's strangled cry died in his throat. Solo caught the man with one hand as he fell, knocked out instantaneously. Quickly Solo pulled the man down the cellar stairs. He shoved him out of sight beneath them. Then he ran back up, listening.

He could hear nothing through the upper door which led into the villa proper. To go that way would risk instant discovery. He preferred to try another means, one which he'd used before to infiltrate older houses in Europe.

Clutching the hamper to his hip, he crept down into the cellar again. In a second room he found what he wanted, a metal monster of a gas heating plant, shut down, fortunately, because the weather was not yet really chilly.

Back in the other room Solo located an old packing case. He stood on this, took out a knife from

another pocket and began to pry at an access plate in one of the large, square hot air ducts running off into the darkness from the central furnace.

With a faint squeal of metal, one corner of the plate came loose. Solo listened, tense, breathing lightly. He was acutely conscious of time ticking away. The guards would be studying their watches down by the road.

Carefully he pried the other edges of the plate free. He lowered it to the floor. Then, testing the duct's weight-bearing capacity by hanging on to its edges and lifting his feet up from the packing case, he found that the duct work was strong enough to hold him. From past experience he'd expected it would be.

In another moment he climbed up inside the square duct. He wriggled his long-muzzle pistol free, holding this in his right hand. The sides of the duct pressed against his shoulders. But he was able to move along by maneuvering his knees and his elbows.

Solo worked his way ahead into the darkness. The duct angled upward. He strained, negotiating the rise with some difficulty. Finally he reached the next level above. Light leaked into the duct past the little upright bars of a discharge grille in the side of the duct a few feet ahead. Solo crawled forward, looked out.

The grille was part of the baseboard in a large, deserted kitchen with a stone floor and hearth. Savory cooking smells drifted to his nostrils. On a wooden table sat a variety of pots and pans and chafing dishes which indicated that someone had finished preparing a meal recently and departed. Ahead along the duct, light leaked in from grilles in other rooms on the main floor. Solo crawled that way.

Surprisingly, the next room he looked out into was a green-tiled chamber where a single lamp light illuminated some unusual furnishings: a dark surgical light in the ceiling; an operating table; consoles of sophisticated cardiac and anesthetic monitoring equipment; glass fronted instrument cases.

An operating theater built into the villa's main floor? It struck Solo as decidedly odd until he remembered what had started this whole sad affair—Ffolkes-Pryce's strange pale pink non-blood. Had he stumbled onto the technical center for the whole project?

Moving on down the duct carefully, Solo reached a point where the duct split. One branch ran right, another left. Little grilles let light from various rooms into each branch. From down the left one, voices drifted.

Solo's heartbeat quickened. The palms of his hands slicked with cold sweat. He was certain he'd caught the tones of a man speaking, and then a woman.

He followed the sound of the voices. After only a few minutes in the duct, he was finding it more and more difficult to move cautiously. His knees and elbows hurt from pressing against the metal. He thrust his right shoulder forward, then shoved with his right elbow and knee. In that way he could move about six inches.

Repeating with the left shoulder, elbow and knee, he went another half a foot. But he was beginning to ache, and developing a slight case of claustrophobia with the metal pressing him on all sides.

He fought down the feeling and inched closer to the grille on his left, where light and the voices spilled in. He pulled up with his face close to the grille. He rolled his right shoulder under slightly, attempting to turn onto his side so

that he could look out. In his left kneecap a cartilage popped. With an involuntary spasm his knee banged the side of the duct.

Solo stopped breathing as the thin metallic sound reverberated away. Fortunately for him, the two people in the room outside the duct were talking while it happened.

"Lugo darling, of course I want to be here with you. But I shouldn't have come. I should be back in Rome."

"Dearest, this conference or whatever it is that you must attend —it is not in session until Monday, am I not correct?"

"But I should be there anyway. I don't know why I let you talk me into it, except that I do love you so very much. It's been a whole new world, falling in love with you. And lately it seems so easy to take the path of least resistance."

"Your work is taxing you. You deserve a little holiday. Besides, I assure you that the travel case whose mysterious contents you were so concerned abut is perfectly safe locked away in my vault. You saw how thick the walls are. Would I trust a flimsy vault with the heirlooms of the Beladrac family? Of course not!"

Of course not! thought Napoleon Solo sourly as he watched the tender little scene transpiring in the large main dining room of the villa.

The grille opened into the baseboard of the long, narrow room which was lit here and there by funereal white tapers in old gold candleabra. The flickering light fell across ancient yellowed damask that covered the long table. Crystal and fine china gleamed. The remains of a sumptuous meal could be seen at the places set for the two diners.

A small fire glowed in a stone hearth directly behind Elisabeth d'Angelo. She looked heartbreakingly lovely. Her bare shoulders reflected the fire's orange gleam. She wore a low-cut strapless evening gown whose color and fit flattered her fine figure. Her sandy-gold hair caught the candle-gleams too. On her left hand, a brilliant over-sized diamond in a silver mounting flashed.

That, Solo remembered, hadn't been on her finger before. Then he wondered how much time had passed since he left the gate guards. Surely more than five minutes. And his left leg was aching more, because of the cramped position in which he lay.

Solo felt the beginnings of a muscle spasm twitching deep within the flesh. He tried to correct his position, couldn't because of the cramped space. He peered out across the rich carpet at the coy dinner table scene.

Count Lugo Beladrac rose from his place opposite Elisabeth. The girl gave him a misty smile as he circled the end of the table and came to stand behind her. Beladrac looked oddly distinguished in

his full set of tails and gleaming white shirt bosom. Despite his ugliness, the man had a certain hypnotic charm.

Beladrac closed his massive left hand gently over her exposed shoulder. "Speaking of heirlooms, my dearest, does the ring please you?"

"Please me!" Elisabeth held the diamond up to catch the candle light. "No girl could want a more beautiful ring."

Beladrac bent, pressed his lips to the gleaming crest of her hair. "And no ring could be more handsomely mounted than on your most beautiful of hands, *bellissima.*"

Acute cynicism made Napoleon Solo want to retch. How *could* Elisabeth possibly fall for such verbal goo?

Elisabeth reached up to touch Beladrac's hand on her shoulder. In Solo's left leg, the internal spasm worsened. He was afraid his leg would start twitching any moment. Elisabeth said: "Lugo, as soon as I discharge my duties at the Conference, can—can we be married?"

"I want you to be sure, Elisabeth sweetest."

"Oh, Lugo, I am sure."

Elisabeth looked far from sure. She looked glassy-eyed, uncertain, and, now that he studied her more closely, totally worn out. "I am sure, darling. I have been sure for many days now—"

It was just then that the little scene changed from a parody of romance to something tinged with horror.

Lugo Beladrac disengaged his left hand gently from Elisabeth's stroking fingers. He touched her throat, caressing it. Elisabeth shuddered, slumped forward, enjoying the touch.

Beladrac bent toward her across her shoulder. The front of his jacket belled away to reveal bright red satin lining. And Napoleon Solo saw that Lugo Beladrac was going to kiss Elisabeth d'Angelo's white throat—

The count's right hand came up around her bare shoulder from the other side. Elisabeth did not see. In that right hand the Count carried some sort of hypodermic, its barrel full of fluid, its needle split into a pair of sharp tips, like fangs—

Vampire! thought Solo, just as a shout burst in the room.

Elisabeth's eyes flew open. Startled, Beladrac thrust the double-tipped needle downward. His angle was off. The needle buried in her shoulder instead of her neck.

Elisabeth shrieked feebly and clawed at it. A door Solo couldn't see crashed open. He recognized the voice of one of the guards, shouting in Italian about a tradesman who had not come out of the house.

Face wrenching with rage and frustration, Beladrac drove the hypodermic plunger all the way to the bottom of the barrel with his thumb. Solo was struggling to get his pistol

up into firing position against the grille. Elisabeth shuddered, pitched forward over the table, knocking a wine goblet off.

In the sudden silence, the goblet shattered. A second later, the muscle spasm in Solo's left leg tore loose. His knee whanged against the metal wall of the duct, a huge, reverberating sound.

Beladrac's satanic eyebrows hooked up. With a guard behind him, Beladrac charged toward the grille. Solo struggled to get his gun hand properly lined up for a shot. Beladrac skidded to a stop. He whipped out his heavy gold filigree cigarette lighter and pointed it toward the grille. His thumb flicked against the side.

A high-pressure stream of knockout gas ripped into the ventilator. Napoleon Solo coughed once. His head slumped. The pistol fell from his hands, hitting the metal of the duct with another clang that had all the odd finality of a funeral bell.

Solo didn't hear it.

ACT III

DING, DONG, BELL— SOLO'S IN THE WELL

THE SHELLEY-PYTHON screamed around another curve.

Lying on his belly on the bonnet with his jaw sticking out over the car's front end, Illya Kuryakin was hit in the face by a dazzle of light. Two immense headlamps filled the road ahead. The Shelley-Python didn't slacken speed, shooting at the big motor lorry like a projectile.

Over the scream of the wind Illya heard a cry of fright from the driver in the lorry's high, open cab. The unseen driver wrenched the wheel. The lorry careened into the ditch, spilling part of its load of cabbages. Two of them hit Illya on the back of the head like cannonballs as the automated sports car narrowly missed the lorry's right rear wheels and shot on.

Jolting, punishing, the bonnet crashed against Illya's belly again and again. He despaired of freeing himself from the racing death-machine, because if he parted the ropes by a sudden tug of strength—granting he could do it at all—he would be thrown off a vehicle hurtling along at well over one hundred miles an hour and he'd probably end up a gooey red paste on the roadside.

Still, the initial shock of being shot into the night on top of a mindless metal machine programmed to go out of control any moment had worn off a little. Illya found himself able to think a little more coherently. *Must be a way off this infernal machine. Must be!*

His view directly ahead was something akin to the sensations he'd once enjoyed on a roller-coaster at Coney Island. Enjoyed? He must have been out of his skull. There was nothing enjoyable in

whizzing around hairpin curves, down short straightaways, up suddenly steep hills, never knowing whether the cracking up was right around the next bend. The Shelley-Python had missed that lorry, but what if a less skillful driver showed up?

Nice gleamed in a blurred pattern of lights visible now and then through breaks between the hills. Illya writhed uncomfortably. The bonnet was heating up.

A cherry glow at the corner of his eye caught his attention. He strained his head around. The wind battered at his right cheek like a ram. He saw that the exhaust pipes projecting from the left side of the bonnet were shining redly, superheated by the continuous high-speed performance of the engine.

For one wild moment Illya stared at these red-hot exhaust pipes and tugged at the ropes which bound his left arm to his side. Could he do it? Did he dare even try?

A certain fatalistic professionalism well implanted in all U.N.C.L.E. agents took over, blanking out most of the intrinsic horror of his situation. Illya experimented with shifting his weight.

Although his bonds did not give greatly, he found that with a little exertion he could move himself a short distance to the left, so that he lay precariously on the shoulder-slope of the bonnet. This placed his left wrist within a couple of inches of the rear-most of the three glowing exhaust pipes.

Breathing in great whooping gulps, Illya thrust his weight hard against his bonds. He felt himself slide ever so slightly down the bonnet's slope. The heat from the exhausts grew intense on his wrists. He wondered whether he'd be able to stand it.

Nonsense! Of course he must stand it. Napoleon Solo, his good friend and comrade, was probably dead back in the morgue in Rome. Therefore it behooved him to get himself off this devil's engine if possible, and go back to Beladrac's villa and take necessary steps to sabotage THRUSH's current plan. From the start he'd hated Beladrac's ugly, supercilious face. Fixing that face in his mind helped give him the strength he needed.

Illya could almost feel the adrenalin pumping, giving him the little extra impetus required to shift his weight so that his wrist-bonds jammed down against the hot exhaust.

A stink of rope fibers and flesh blew up briefly into his face. Then the wind whipped them away. Heat rose around his lower arm, beginning to bring intense pain—

Illya shoved harder, pushing his roped wrist down on the pipe. The smell worsened. The pain was awful. He pressed harder—

Suddenly the rope sizzled through. Illya's downward pressure sent his hand hurtling free by the

exhaust pipe. Wildly he dragged his arm back, just an instant before it touched the pavement whistling past underneath.

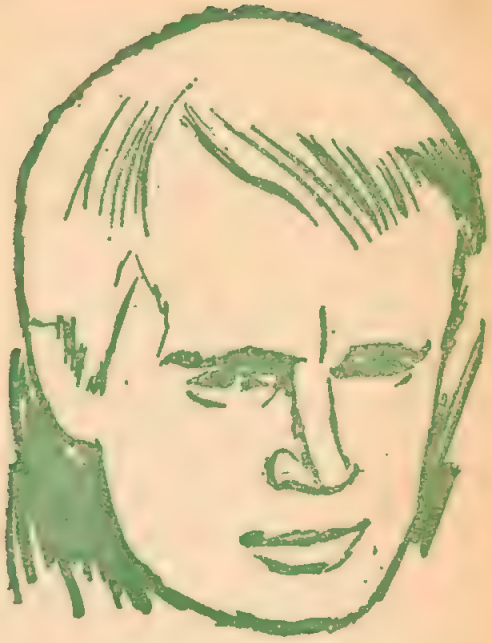
Illya hugged the hurting hand to his side, feeling it tremble and shake with the force of the exertion. If he'd so much as touched the road at this high speed, his hand would have been snapped off—

One hand free. How much time before the automatic controls failed? And he certainly couldn't free himself and just hop off the vehicle. He'd be jellied when he hit. That meant he had to find some means of hoisting himelf back into the cockpit to where the brakes were located. Quite a challenge, with his legs lashed up and over the windscreen.

The Shelley-Python hit another grüelling curve, went skidding through it. The road hugged the edge of a precipice on the left. The cliff dropped away sheer to darkness far below. The lights of Nice, its hotels and harbors, had receded a long way since he'd last glimpsed them. He was high up. The dizzying effect of the chasm on the left only intensified the intense precariousness of his position.

Swallowing hard, Illya shifted his weight again so that his right wrist rested against a hot pipe on that side. More pain. Then those bonds frayed too. Now his whole torso was free.

The sports car seemed to be traveling along a relatively level



stretch. Illya took the chance, starting to twist himself violently over on to his back.

Only a single rope lashed him back there, running from his ankles down over the windscreen into the cockpit. The rope twisted. He flopped onto his back and immediately began to slide off the bonnet. His hands went out instinctively, seized the nearest holds to keep himself from falling—

Screaming without thinking, Illya gripped the two exhaust pipes just long enough to give himself a violent push. He used all his strength to drive himself back to a sitting position. He caught the top edge of the windscreen, kicked hard so that the rope slid down to where it ran around the right side of the screen.

Illya stuck his legs around that

way, felt his feet drop past the cockpit's edge into the cockpit proper. He got a firmer hold on the windscreen, even though the palms of his hands were raw, blistered. He said a little wordless prayer and gave a pull.

His whole middle body swung out into space over the side of the racing car. For one wild moment, he thought that he wouldn't be able to hang onto the windscreen, that he'd fall backwards and hit his head like a ball on the racing pavement and have his brains dashed out—

But somehow he held fast, jerked his feet. And got his lower body down into the cramped cockpit. He crouched awkwardly there. He used his pain-laced fingers to pry and tug and twist at the rope on his ankles. Dimly in the starlight he saw the spider-webbing of auto-control wires which Beladrac's mechanics had rigged. Illya was afraid to disturb them. Already he thought he heard a peculiar buzzing up where the wires disappeared in the dark beside the brake pedal.

Blood leaked down onto his fingers from his palms. It made working with the ropes difficult. At last he got the main knot unfastened. In a second he unlooped the rest of the strand, worked it down off his ankles.

The buzzing grew more pronounced. The Shelley-Python was still barrelling along the straightaway beside the precipice. With difficulty Illya unbent his left leg. He stretched it forward into the leg space and felt for pedals. He found one, pressured it. But there was no response.

Must be the accelerator, probably over-ridden by the programmed controls. He shifted his foot to the left. Wind beat against his face over the windscreen. He contacted another pedal, touched it, felt the sensitive car respond. He sighted along the road ahead.

The straightaway continued along the precipice for at least another mile. He couldn't risk waiting. The buzzing increased. He hit the brake and gave the steering wheel a savage twist to the right. The Shelley-Python's tires smoked and howled. As the engine was forced into deceleration, the gearbox protested with a spit and grind. The car shot toward an embankment rising on the right side of the road.

How fast was he going? Fifty now? Forty? Illya couldn't tell. The bonnet reached the hill-slope, tilted up. Illya flew backwards, grabbing at air. He kicked free of the cockpit, went spinning. The stars whirled. He came down with a massive, bone-wrecking thud that knocked him half unconscious. His single salvation had been landing on the hill's heavy turf.

Suddenly from under the bonnet of the car came a skyrocketing of greenish sparks. The Shelley-Python caromed off the side of the hill and bounced back toward the road-

way. The motor noise stopped suddenly.

Silently, eerily, the racing car hit the pavement and lifted off, its tires leaving smoke-trails behind. It shot out over the edge of the precipice like a missile, arching out and out silently until it lost velocity and began to fall.

The thick grass against Illya's palms hurt unmercifully. Abruptly, like the mutter of a thunderstorm, the car struck somewhere down at the bottom of the cliff, A geyser of light, molten-red, climbed into the sky and receded.

Illya's whole body felt crushed, battered. He rolled over onto his stomach so that his palms would not touch the ground.

Beladrac, he thought. *Beladrac's villa.*

Must get up. Go back there.

Assignment.

Job to do.

Got to get back there and see what—

The stars pulsed bright, then dimmed. If he was going back to Beladrac's villa, it would have to be later. Illya knew he was going to black out.

In a second more, it happened.

TWO

DARKNESS. Thick. Stifling. Tinged with dampness. Napoleon Solo woke in it, terrified.

Every instinct recoiled and rebelled against the unclean, subterranean odor of that dark. He thrust his hands out in front of him, wiggling the fingers, hoping to touch something that would give him a sense of orientation. A strangled shout worked up into his throat—

All at once, like a relay switch being thrown, reason took over. Solo remembered what had happened. He drew his hands back to his sides, embarrassed at the way his sudden wakening in the muffling dark had started his heart hammering and his mind careening on a panic course.

Find out where you are.

The ancient, primitive fear of the dark receded a little. Solo realized he was sitting on a rough, hard floor, propped up against a similar type of wall. He felt on both sides of his legs. His fingertips found the indentations of worn mortar between bricks. Then they brushed across the faintly wet surfaces of the bricks themselves.

Reaching behind his head, he discovered that the wall he leaned against was likewise made of brick. Solo scrambled to his feet. His shoes made an odd, hollow clacking sound, raising faint echoes. This further confirmed his suspicions that he was prisoned somewhere underground.

Where? In Beladrac's villa? Probably. But there was no way of telling for certain.

Cautiously Solo worked his way around the curve of the wall. After he had continued this for a minute

or so, he stopped. He turned, faced the center of his cell, started walking in that direction.

Eight long strides brought him up against the curved wall on the opposite side. He was inside some lightless underground prison-cell in the shape of a cylinder.

Once more he began a circuit of the wall, feeling carefully, feeling high and low. When enough time had elapsed so that he was certain he'd gone at least once around the circumference, he gave up. He leaned back, letting a little sibilant breath of exasperation slip out.

As far as he could tell, there were no doors anywhere in the brick. Quickly he searched through his clothing. Beladrac had removed everything, including his pocket communicator. So no help was to be had in that direction. And his special shoes with the tiny compartments that held various powerful gas and explosive capsules had been taken too.

Now a new kind of terror began to gnaw at Napoleon Solo's mind. Not formless terror; clearly defined. He knew the limits of his prison. He didn't like them one bit. How high was the ceiling?

By way of experiment, he tried climbing the part of the wall nearest him. The grooves in which the mortar lay were not deep enough to provide finger-holds. He fell once, twice, three times before giving up.

Solo wished he had a cigarette. He wondered what had become of Elisabeth. Was she alive, having taken that nasty pronged needle in her neck? Had Beladrac gone? Elisabeth too? Unfortunately the period from the gas attack in the air shaft until he wakened here was a total loss.

He didn't feel too badly, all things considered. A slight touch of nausea, a mild headache. Nothing at all to worry about—*if* he had a fighting chance of getting out of this peculiar circular dungeon.

Pondering the problem, he was startled by a sudden rasp of sound overhead. Light washed down into the cylinder. A huge stone cap that topped the cylinder had been removed; Solo saw two of Beladrac's Thrushmen laboring to shift it all the way to one side.

The round opening was a good twenty feet above Solo's head. There seemed to be additional space above that, as though the mouth of the cylinder was part of a floor; higher than the mouth itself, Solo glimpsed a ceiling, a dim light bulb burning.

All at once Count Lugo Beladrac's ugly face popped over the lip of the top. His hand appeared, carrying a huge electric torch which he snapped on. Wincing from the light, Solo recoiled against the wall. Beladrac crouched beside the mouth of the brick cylinder-cell, moving the light so that Solo was finally caught in the middle of it.

"Now, now, Solo," Beladrac

called, his voice bouncing and echoing around the circular brick wall. "Mustn't be reticent. After all, there's no place to hide in my little oubliette."

Oubliette. That was the word for which Solo had been searching. An oubliette was a special type of underground dungeon, usually secret. Many old homes throughout Europe had them, dating to the time when political prisoners were kept penned up until they conveniently died.

Solo had never seen an oubliette before, though he decided now that he could have skipped the novelty altogether. "How long have I been down here?" He had a tendency to shout until he discovered that the oubliette acted as a kind of sound-chamber, carrying his speech upward quite clearly when he spoke in a normal tone.

"The better part of three hours," said the count.

"Is this supposed to soften me up?"

"Not particularly," answered the count with a shrug. "No doubt it will, though."

"And I doubt that very much," Solo said, with more bravado than he actually felt.

Count Beladrac clucked his tongue and flashed his huge white smile that distorted his ugly face into a grotesque mask. "Mr. Solo, I believe you are laboring under a false assumption. I seem to detect a conviction that I have put you down there for psychological reasons. A little preparation for torture, let's say? Nothing could be further from the truth. I have no intention of seeing you again after this stone cap is rolled back into place.

"I do wish I had time to subject you to some slightly more creative and painful mode of death. Unfortunately I have an important mission to carry out. I can't let personal whims stand in its way, even though I could think of nothing more delightful than watching you die second by second and bit by bit."

Again the continental shrug. "Ah, well. My loss of pleasure is minor, especially now that THRUSH is on the threshold of final victory. It will begin with war in the Middle East, and end with the globe in chaos, nation against nation. The free world's so-called defenders, the U.N.C.L.E., will be torn by strife and treason from within. You see, Mr. Solo, we now have the means to bring members of your organization under our direct control. Our goal is to take over five hundred agents in five months."

"Five hundred—" Solo exploded.

"Certainly. We have at least eighty under—ah—treatment already. That is, they have received, quite unknown to themselves, of course, the first inoculations which produce initial symptoms of lassitude. Their slumber becomes so

deep at night, it is quite easy for our people to gain entrance to their homes and begin the transference operations while the victims snore on blissfully. They never feel a thing, and never waken."

Solo's mind boggled. "You break in and *operate* on U.N.C.L.E. agents?"

"But of course. The first treatment is usually applied with a needle accidentally scraped or scratched against the victim's hand or cheek in the guise of some simple accident. It renders the victim into a state of virtual hypnosis for precisely six nights. Sometime during that period, one of our surgical teams breaks in and effects the first transfer."

"Of blood." Solo's face was stark in the flash's glare. "That's what it's all about."

"How brilliant of you. I assume you learned this when you got hold of the corpse of Ffolkes-Pryce?" the count said.

"You're nothing but a damn bloody bunch of vampires—"

"Let's not become hysterical, Mr. Solo. Vampires we decidedly are not. Our procedure is highly scientific. The THRUSH Central research laboratories have spent years developing the serum with which we replace the normal blood of our—ah—takeovers, as we call them."

Remembering, Solo saw thin, pinkish, transparent fluid. "Three compounds of the hydrobrionic alkaline class. Drugs that make a person lose his will—"

"Four compounds," corrected Beladrac. "But yes, the effect is as you describe."

"When does that happen?"

"It happens gradually. We are able to assume a certain degree of psychological control from the very first transference, or operation, or transfusion, if you prefer that word. The takeover becomes more suggestible due to extreme fatigue. You saw how your little girl friend was behaving? She has received the third transfer. Only the fourth remains, which I had intended to see to this weekend. We have a complete operating theater here in the villa, you know."

Solo said nothing, but he remembered the surgical lights, consoles, the operating table he'd seen while crawling through the grille.

The count went on: "Elisabeth, the poor pathetic little mouse, has had seventy-five per cent of her blood replaced with our special serum. I am not even certain she is going to need the final twenty-five per cent. I drugged her at dinner just before you were discovered because I thought our technicians here would want to perform the operation. Now, it turns out, it's their opinion that she is already almost totally under our control. The last transfer is unnecessary before I return her to Rome."

Beladrac's bushy brows quirked as he nodded. "Elisabeth is one of

our most important takeovers, due to the delicate and highly important role she will play at the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference. Indeed, THRUSH Central felt so strongly about the importance of this phase of the plan that I was instructed to break my cover and personally supervise her activities. Thus our little charade, including the meeting at the sports car rally in America. Really, she's a frightfully drab little creature. Nothing like the splendid wenches with whom I usually consort."

So choked with rage and frustration was Napoleon Solo, he couldn't even speak.

"Ah! Delighted to see I penetrated under your skin at last!" Beladrac called breezily. "I did want to step down here and reinforce the point, Solo. You have failed miserably."

Solo already had unpleasant suspicions to that effect. Stalling for time, he said: "Tell me about this serum you exchange with human blood. How can a human being live on it?"

Beladrac waved with the torch. Its beam jittered crazily over the damp bricks of the oubliette, making ghostly shadows.

"Oh, naturally, one can't for very long. Our laboratories place the maximum survival time for one hundred per cent takeovers at nine to twelve months following the last transfer. By that time corpuscular decay has set in. Nothing is left in

the bloodstream to fight bodily infection. The victim simply succumbs.

"We knew that when we started, of course, which explains why we are on such a precise timetable. We must have all our takeovers inoculated within five months. That will give us another four months, approximately, to destroy U.N.C.L.E. from within."

Seeing the hellish sincerity of the man, Solo had no choice but to believe him. Mr. Waverly's reports of defections already confirmed that the THRUSH plan was working. What would happen when the supra-nation had a bigger cadre of agents in its power, a cadre five hundred strong?

Such a force could wreck U.N.C.L.E.'s entire operation, disclose its secrets and bring the whole edifice tumbling down in a confusion of fear and betrayal.

Something else sprang into Solo's

mind. He said two words: "The war—"

"The war I mentioned? In the Middle East? It will serve as the backdrop for our grand plan. Serve to keep U.N.C.L.E. busy, for one thing, while we bore from within.

"*Signorina* d'Angelo will see that war breaks out, right enough. She won't present her evidence of THRUSH activity to the peace conference on Monday. By the way, I already know about the contents of her little travel case in which I've pretended total disinterest. To continue—on Monday she will accuse one of the two nations involved in the dispute. She will in effect place the entire weight and prestige of U.N.C.L.E. behind her accusation. You can imagine what will happen."

Indeed Solo could. The conference would break up completely. War would burst and bloom south of the Mediterranean. And with U.N.C.L.E. thus occupied, THRUSH could maneuver the agents it had taken over. THRUSH would probably begin with sabotage of the U.N.C.L.E. communications network, and advance to assassination of all the executives in Section I. Solo turned absolutely cold at the thought. And somehow he was certain that Count Lugo Beladrac was not making any of it up.

"Where's Elisabeth right now?" Solo asked.

"Preparing to leave for Rome. We're motoring there. Since the technicians assured me she does not really need the final transfer of serum, we shall go tonight."

"But she was awake when you stabbed that needle into her! She saw you!"

Count Beladrac stood up, towering against the dim ceiling light far above. "Indeed she did. We gave her a booster injection before she regained consciousness, however. The booster exercises a synergistic effect upon the serum. It added just enough of an extra touch of dullness to her mind so that she was unable to recall exactly what happened at the dinner table."

Beladrac smiled his white, arrogant smile. "I'm sure that I shall be able to talk my way around it. I have never met a woman I could not persuade. And, as you know, Elisabeth is very fond of me."

He leered down a moment, obscenely pleased with himself. Then he shrugged again. "The girl may have one or two unpleasant memories which she won't be able to explain away. But she will do what we want."

The count passed his big flash to one of the guards hovering behind him. Then he dusted his hands together elaborately.

"I did want you to have a little information on which to speculate before you died, Solo. It should hearten you, knowing that you are unable to stop THRUSH this time. Do you have any further questions?"

"No," said Napoleon Solo. "But I'm going to kill you, ugly man."

"Oh? When do you propose to do that?"

"There'll come a time. I'll do it for what you've done to her."

Wrinkling his nose, Beladrac said, "Your taste is abominable. She's pretty, but cheap."

Solo leaped at the brick wall. His nails dug into the mortar grooves. One thumbnail split down the middle, bringing excruciating pain. For a moment he hung on the bricks, poised like a monkey, as though he might race straight up the wall. Then he lost momentum. Gravity clutched him. He fell down to the brick floor.

"You Americans are so nauseatingly physical about everything," Beladrac sighed. "Well, I must leave you. As soon as the stone is rolled over, one of my lads will turn a valve which will fill the oubliette with water. In that water will be a particularly fast-acting virus. It has a most unpleasant effect upon the mucous membranes of the body. You won't be able to keep from swallowing some of the water eventually. The moment you do, a swift cycle will begin—a complete disease cycle, from infection to death, in less than ten minutes.

Count Beladrac raised his right hand in jaunty salute. "And might I remind you that men and women in this world tend to overlook a man's ugliness so long as that man *wins*. THRUSH will win and so will I. *Au revoir.*" Another wave, and he vanished.

The black disc of the stone cover thrust out over the opening at the top. Like an eclipse, it slowly pushed away all of the light from the dim ceiling bulb. Last the stone chunked into place.

Solo pricked up his ears. He heard a gurgling, a bubbling. Then, with a faint hum of high-speed pumps for counterpoint, there was a wet rushing. The water swirled up from the small floor gratings he hadn't spotted before. Wild thoughts flashed in his mind. He saw images of Beladrac's hideous face; Elisabeth nodding and drowsing.

He imagined her denouncing one of the parties at the conference table in the name of U.N.C.L.E. He saw tanks rumbling; cannons belching; jet fighters diving over the desert near Suez. He saw the war headlines; the spreading international chaos.

And he had a frighteningly grim mental picture, at the last, of some trusted U.N.C.L.E. operative coming in to confer with Mr. Alexander Waverly.

As Waverly talked about the growing defections in U.N.C.L.E.'s ranks, this nameless, faceless man, taken over bodily by THRUSH, drew a gun, aimed it at Waverly's head, pulled the trigger. A splatter of blood, spreading, spreading—

No panic! Solo thought. *It's bad but it's not that bad.*

Though indeed it was. The water was already up to his ankles. It wasn't chilly. Rather it was lukewarm, and tinged with a peculiar mouldy smell. Infected? Yes. He dared not take any of it in, not a drop.

It took all of Napoleon Solo's carefully developed will power to stand perfectly still until the water reached the level of his neck. Then, holding his mouth shut tight, he began to tread water. The buffeting of the water within the oubliette was gentle at the surface, even though the water churned violently where it was being pumped in at the floor.

At the end of fifteen minutes Solo had floated far enough up in the brick cylinder so that he could reach over his head and shove at the stone cap. He pushed with all his strength while his legs kept threshing to keep him afloat.

The stone gave a fraction. A hairline of light showed, perhaps an inch wide. But try as he might, Solo couldn't move the stone any further. The water bore him higher. He kept his mouth tightly closed. He was being slowly jammed up against the under-surface of the stone. He'd be swallowing water soon.

Somewhere far away, gunshots rang out. Wildly, desperately, Solo began to yell. He called for help as the germ-laden water lapped and splashed over his chin, dribbled off his cheeks. He yelled and yelled, lungs hurting, legs aching, wondering whether help was out there—and if they'd hear in time.

THREE

FROM A BOULDER to one side of the dark road, Illya Kuryakin surveyed the villa.

About a hundred yards ahead down the road's shoulder, a driveway branched off to the right. Beyond it Illya saw a high tile-roofed house in the starlight. Not many windows were lighted at this hour of the evening. The place had a deserted look. But it was the house he wanted, right enough.

When he'd wakened back up in the hills after the harrowing ride on the robot-controlled sports car, he'd started trudging down the road in the general direction of Nice. He'd planned to go all the way down into town, phone the nearest U.N.C.L.E. station and ask directions. Before he had gone very far a vegetable farmer on his way home late from market stopped his truck on the road in response to Illya's wave.

Yes, the driver knew the location of Count Beladrac's villa. All in the district knew its whereabouts. Wasn't the count a renowned ladies' man, not to mention a sportsman? Illya was instructed to take a certain turn of the road, then after another kilometer, look for the two towering pine trees which flanked the driveway's entrance. These Il-

lya saw now, dark-silver cones against the sky.

He felt wretched. He looked equally bad. Fortunately the darkness had hidden much of the damage—facial bruises, gashes crusted over, blood dried, and the awful burns on his hands—from the trucker. Illya was certain that if the man had seen him full face, he would have driven on with a shudder after crossing himself.

Illya had torn strips of his jacket lining to bind around his wrists where the exhaust pipes had seared. The cloth chafed, itched, caused excruciating pain each time a fold of the silk rubbed a raw spot. He couldn't think about that now, though. His responsibility was to get inside that villa, discover what had happened to the count and Elisabeth.

To his right across the road, Illya noticed a shoulder of land which led down toward the count's property. Some thin weeds filled it. Illya crept from cover, crossed the road and slipped among the trees.

He worked his way straight ahead. The path he was blazing would bring him out right onto a little bluff which dropped down onto the count's property, well back of the road and the pine trees. As he moved along he had occasional flashes of dizziness. Once he had to stop and lean against a beech tree until things stopped spinning.

In a few more minutes he navigated his way to the trees nearest

the little bluff. From this vantage point he could see the side of the villa, including a tradesman's entrance with a single light burning above it. Further back was a triple garage. All three overhead doors were raised. No autos stood in the dark bays.

A sense of dismay struck him. The Rolls-Royce gone? Had Beladrac left? If so, where was he going? Then Illya wondered about the advisability of trying to penetrate the villa at all.

He might be asking for more trouble if the mechanics were still on the premises.

He thought of Elisabeth d'Angelo. She was his responsibility. The absence of the Rolls didn't guarantee that she had left too. It was his duty to make certain one way or another. He only wished that he had a weapon. He slid from behind the tree trunk, approached the sloping little bluff and jumped.

Trouble came while he was still in mid-air.

From his left a man shouted, *"Hold!"* in French. A machine pistol rattled. Illya felt something whistle by, unpleasantly close. He struck the ground and rolled. He let out a cry and flopped over onto his face. He lay unmoving.

The two men emerged from their hiding places behind the large pine trees near the road. As they advanced, their machine pistols glittered in the faint glow of the stars. They talked to one another in muffled French. They halted about six feet from where Illya lay.

Neither said a word for the better part of a minute. Then one spoke to the other: "All right. He must be down. Let us see who he is."

Illya closed both hands like claws on the wrist of the one who reached down and grabbed his shoulder. The man swore. Illya twisted on to his shoulder blades and drove his right leg up into the man's midsection.

The moment Illya's feet hit, he wrenched at the man's machine pistol and jerked it loose. Startled, the other guard recovered quickly. He twisted around to his right to get a clear shot. Illya pushed the first guard out of the way, decided to worry about the pistol's noise later, squeezed the trigger.

A stutter of sound ripped toward the second guard, caught him in the belly just as his own hand was constricting to fire. The man went "gaugh" deep in his throat and keeled over backwards.

Illya immediately turned his attention to the other guard. The man was floundering on all fours. Bullets weren't necessary on him. Illya merely reversed his weapon and rapped the guard twice on the bulge at the back of his skull.

The man relaxed peacefully into the mixture of pine needles and dried grass that covered the ground. He snored. Illya turned the man's head so that the sound was muffled. He clambered to his feet—

Just as the click of a latch sounded behind him.

Spinning, Illya saw a third guard open the tradesman's door and peer out, a swarthy man in a turtleneck sweater. The man spotted Illya and whipped up his snub-nosed automatic.

Illya's eyes were blurred. He still hadn't recovered from the awful physical and emotional shock of the ride on the Shelley-Python. He fired. The shots missed, chipping wood from the door-frame. The guard fired back. He missed because Illya went stumbling away to the right. Illya shot again.

The guard did a peculiar kind of shuffle with his feet and swayed forward through the opening. He dropped his automatic as he fell. Blood ran in a black line down his right temple.

The man's blind, dying hands grabbed wildly at space, caught the

bell-twist on the outside of the door, gave it a savage turn as he fell—

Deep inside the villa, the bell rang loudly.

FOUR

CAUGHT THERE in the open with the light from the tradesman's entrance flooding over him, Illya Kuryakin had a wild impulse to run. He was exhausted. His whole body ached. He fought to keep from fainting.

The guard in the turtle-neck was sprawled out on the doorsill, stone-stiff. The echoes of the bell reverberated—

Panting, Illya ran back to the little bluff. He scrambled up into the trees and flopped down. The side door of the villa remained open. No one else appeared.

A night bird chirruped back in the woods. High in the sky an airliner with red and green lights flashing rumbled west along the Riviera. Illya realized finally that the command post had been abandoned. And just within the last few hours, at that.

Where had Beladrac gone? Illya wondered. Had he surrendered Elisabeth and then returned to Rome? No, that hardly made sense. Illya was so fatigued, so dazed, that the thought of searching the villa room by room exhausted him. Was there really any need to go inside? He didn't see why. The evidence was clear. The place had been abandoned.

Illya climbed down the bluff again. He started toward the big pine trees in a limping walk. Then professionalism got the better of him. He turned back. He limped into the villa through the tradesman's entrance. He started up a short staircase which evidently led to the main part of the house. His hand was slippery with sweat as he gripped the rail.

Ah, he thought wearily, *I should skip the whole thing. They've gone. It's fruitless to search.*

That was the moment when he heard the sound of a human voice from somewhere in the cellar, a man's voice, hoarsely crying out for help. Had his imagination tricked him? Illya listened hard. The cry came again. He plunged down the cellar steps in a stumbling run.

ACT IV

THE NIGHT OF THE VAMPIRE

AND TO think," said Napoleon Solo, "that you almost neglected your professional duty!"

"But Napoleon," Illya protested, "how was I supposed to know that my professional duty included saving you? To all intents and purposes Beladrac's house was empty."

"Good Lord, what kind of an excuse is that? Think of all you might have overlooked! The operating theater, for one thing—"

"And you, inside the oubliette, of course. You remind me of it constantly."

"Well, it was my hide in the soup. Another two minutes and I'd have swallowed a couple of quarts of that germ culture and that would have been it."

"I very nearly didn't have strength to move the stone cap," Illya said.

"That's obvious," Solo bantered back. "I did most of the work from underneath."

"I was half dead on my feet. I wanted to get back to Nice and check in. I think Mr. Waverly would have accepted that explanation."

"But I wouldn't have."

"How could you? You'd have been dead, I believe."

"Oh," Solo said, "that's right." He grinned.

They'd been arguing that way, on and off, most of this long droning Monday, ever since they first took up their positions in a couple of comfortable chairs behind a folding screen on the balcony overlooking the salon of the Hotel Penti in Rome.

Solo felt guilty about idling around in such comparative luxury, courtesy of the hotel management whom he'd browbeaten via a phone call from Waverly. The management had smuggled them onto the balcony overlooking the large horseshoe conference table under the great chandeliers in the glittering hall. This wasn't exactly the toughest duty, simply sitting and waiting for Elisabeth d'Angelo to appear for her scheduled part on the program.

Yet the enforced idleness, the luxurious surroundings, the feel of a good sharkskin suit against Solo's arms and legs, only emphasized, somehow, the tremendous things at stake.

After the rescue from the oubliette, the agents had contacted the U.N.C.L.E. man on station in Nice by phone from the villa. An ambulance came. Illya was given medical attention, his wrists and palms treated and bandaged. The bandages showed white at the edge of Illya's dark blazer cuffs now.

Solo had contacted Waverly from the villa. Within a few hours a team of U.N.C.L.E. search experts arrived in Nice via chartered plane. Presumably the team was still going over the villa, ripping the operating theatre apart and hunting all over the house for concealed records and files.

Count Lugo Beladrac would have gotten a bit of a surprise if he had returned. But he never did. Perhaps one of his henchmen had come back, seen the official cars all around the place, fled and gotten in touch with Beladrac somewhere. At any rate, Beladrac had probably chalked the villa off as a tactical loss; he had left, confident that both Illya and Solo were out of action.

And he had his most important

asset with him, anyway, wherever he was. Elisabeth.

Beladrac had vanished. More U.N.C.L.E. agents, flown in from Bonn, Paris, London, were combing Rome now. But thus far no positive reports had come in.

Napoleon Solo slouched deeper into the chair, fanned back his cuff. The hands of his watch stood almost at ten to four. Elisabeth was scheduled to present the U.N.C.L.E. evidence at four sharp. If she didn't show, they would have a real crisis on their hands. The delegates on the two sides of the great table in the hall below hadn't been doing so well today, even after taking the weekend to cool off.

And if Elisabeth did show, Solo was prepared for an even worse crisis. Her presence would mean that she was still in THRUSH's control.

"—and so I say to the delegates that no proof has been forthcoming at this conference table of the good intentions of the other party concerned. Rather, we came face to face again with the evidence presented by the intelligence officers of our own country, evidence which indicates that those who now come here pretending good faith are actually as ravening wolves in the fold—disguised. Bent upon sinking the fangs of their imperialism into the throat of my country, the Shaikhdom of—"

In singsong English the speaker droned on. He was a robust, middle-aged man wearing white robes and a flowing white burnous. He spoke from a raised podium at the closed end of the horseshoe table. The plenary session of the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference numbered perhaps fifty. About twenty were from each of the countries concerned. The rest were diplomats from neutral nations who were attempting to keep the negotiations on the track.

The representatives of the Shaikhdom were launched upon a tirade, villifying those from the other country. The accused, hook-nosed men in Westernized morning coats, looked and listened with stiff fury. The companions of the delegate in the burnous applauded at various points during his harangue. One of them went so far as to exclaim, "Hear, hear!" in a precise Etonian accent.

The delegate in the burnous grew louder, his voice actually shaking the public address system. His arm-waving image was multiplied a dozen, two dozen times by the mirrors on the walls of the Gran Saloon. His voice reached a climax:

"—and therefore we refuse to insult our intelligence further by listening to the petty subterfuges of the delegates seated opposite us at this table!".

"One moment, one moment!" cried the conference chairman, a Swede. He leaped up to seize the microphone. "We cannot allow

such accusations! They violate the spirit of this—"

A delegate in morning coat from the opposite side was on his feet, shaking his fist. "And we'll listen to no more! We have tried to negotiate in good faith, but—"

His voice was drowned under a storm of shouts and boos from the opposite side, plus shouts of approval from his own fellows. Illya rubbed his nose, looking depressed. "Sound the bugles. Advance the colors. To arms! Let the war begin!"

Solo was about to reply when he heard a faint *beepa-beepa* from an inner pocket. He whipped out his rod-like communicator, adjusted the calibrations.

"Channel B open. Solo here."

A voice crackled faintly against the background of shouts and oaths from the floor of the conference hall. "Gunther, outside the hotel. She's arrived. In the Rolls-Royce."

"Is Beladrac with her?"

"No. A chauffeur dropped her off and parked the car in the hotel lot. She's already inside the lobby."

"What about the little travel case?" Solo asked. "Does she have it with her?"

"No, she's carrying nothing except her handbag and a file folder of papers."

"Stay in position," Solo ordered. "I'll call if we need you." He switched off the communicator, thrust it back in his pocket, his face pale with worry. "You heard it, Illya. She hasn't got the tapes or the microfilm records. That means the count has 'em, and she's still operating under his control."

Solo's mind worked swiftly, rolling with the terrible new contingencies of the situation.

"We can't let her get to that microphone. If she'd brought the travel case, we'd know she at least had the evidence. We could get her out of the way and present it ourselves. But that file folder probably contains a prepared speech the Count's ghosted for her. I suggest we get down there on the floor, take the chairman aside and tell him he can't let Elisabeth speak. Otherwise—"

Illya had turned ashen. "I think it's too late for that, Napoleon. Listen."

Solo edged toward the screen, shoved it partially aside so that he could look out onto the great floor of the conference room. He saw the delegates in their burnouses craning their heads toward the rear of the hall. Their opposite numbers in morning coats did the same, along with all the diplomats from the neutral countries.

The Swedish chairman was at the podium, having displaced the fiery orator. He was attempting to inject some measure of calm into the proceedings by talking in a firm, quiet voice:

"—and I ask you to direct your attention to the rear of the hall, gentlemen, so that I may introduce

the young lady who is scheduled to speak at this hour. Her name is Miss d'Angelo. She carries some important documentary evidence which it is imperative that she present to this conference. We are of the opinion that her evidence will show conclusively that the disastrous international incidents which have brought us all to this table are not the work of terrorists employed by either government represented here. Rather, they are the work of a third party—the supra-nation which styles itself with the code name THRUSH."

Faces paled at the horseshoe table. There was a murmur of whispering. The Swede went on smoothly: "—we hope to demonstrate that THRUSH has been exploiting all those of us concerned with world peace, and exploiting your two governments most specifically, to serve its own ends." The chairman unfolded a yellow sheet. "Before I present Miss d'Angelo formally, I wish to read this cable."

Listening, Solo strained for a glimpse of Elisabeth. But she was evidently standing far back beneath the balcony at the rear of the room.

"The cable says, *This is to inform the delegates to the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference that Miss Elisabeth d'Angelo is our authorized representative, that she presents her evidence with our complete approval, and that her findings are fully validated and endorsed by this organization. Signed A. Waverly, Policy and Operations, United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.*"

Stunned silence gripped the conference table a moment. Then excited talk broke out, even louder than before. The chairman rapped his gavel once, twice, three times.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! Time is

rushing. Miss d'Angelo, if you please?"

Smartly dressed in a tweed suit, Elisabeth walked out from beneath the balcony. She was white-cheeked. Her expression was dazed, foggy, uncertain.

"Let's get her out of here," Solo growled, already moving.

He thrust the screen aside, headed for the balcony rail. Illya was right behind him.

The conference chairman boomed on the microphone, "Miss d'Angelo, are you quite all right?"

Elisabeth passed a hand across her eyes. Her speech was labored, but her voice carried despite the lack of a microphone. The delegates all turned toward her as she moved down one side of the great horseshoe table, speaking as she took step after uncertain step:

"Yes, Mr. Chairman, thank you. But—I'm afraid the evidence which I have for you—"

At the balcony rail, Solo checked. He gripped the rail with hands whose knuckles had turned white. He wanted to hear this, wanted to be absolutely sure.

Illya stopped beside him. Though the two U.N.C.L.E. agents were quite visible now, no one below noticed them, so intent were all the delegates on Elisabeth.

As though some power stronger than her own will were forcing the words out of her, she continued: "—the evidence which I have for you, evidence gathered by the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, does not support our original conclusion that —THRUSH has been causing the trouble in the Middle East. No, Mr. Chairman, we now have new facts to indicate—"

Elisabeth kept walking, up past the side of the conference table behind the delegates in burnouses who screwed around in their plush chairs to watch her.

"—new facts to indicate that *all* of the incidents are the work of terrorists employed by the government of just one of the nations whose delegates are seated—"

Solo vaulted over the balcony rail and dropped the ten feet to the carpet inside the U of the table.

He landed with a jolt. Perfect coordination kept him on his feet. He flipped back the lapel of his jacket, whipped out the long-muzzle pistol even as he jumped up on the table and leaped off the other side. In a second he'd slipped behind Elisabeth, grabbed her elbow and was pulling her toward the main entrance of the great hall.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen," he said with a tense, wolfish smile, "but we're relieving Miss d'Angelo of her authority to speak for U.N.C.L.E."

Elisabeth began to struggle. "Take your filthy hands off me!" She swung a gloved hand at Solo's head. Her eyes were glassy. She didn't recognize him. "I will speak! I have orders—"

"From the wrong side," Solo whispered, pulling her steadily toward the door.

Illya had landed nearer the door after jumping from the balcony. Gun drawn, he saw Solo approaching with his struggling captive, wrenched the doors open. Startled, the pair of security guards stationed outside swung around.

One spotted Illya's pistol, pulled out his own walnut swagger stick. Illya murmured an apology and whacked the man across the back of the head with the butt of his gun. Illya caught the man as he fell, shoved him into the other guard who was charging forward.

Solo had nearly reached the door. His arm was around Elisabeth's waist now. She was kicking at his shins, caterwauling, screaming, "No! Let go of me! They'll kill me!" Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Elisabeth, stop it!" Solo cracked out. "You're safe. Don't you recognize me? Napoleon—"

"I don't know you! Let me go! They'll kill me if I don't speak!"

Emotionally torn by the anguish in her cry, Solo had a tough time bringing himself to manhandle her. But it was necessary. She was scratching at him with her nails, ripping his cheeks.

"Hurry!" Illya called from the doors, alternately watching Solo and the interior of the vast Hotel Penti lobby where guests and hotel staff turned to stare in puzzlement and then alarm.

Deftly Solo jabbed the index finger of his free hand against a nerve control center beneath Elisabeth's right ear. Her protests stopped. All the stiffness went out of her body.

As she sagged Solo caught her like a meal-sack. He slung her over his shoulder and turned to run, just as Illya spotted a flurry of activity out by the triple bank of revolving doors on the lobby's far side.

"Someone's coming in the main door, Napoleon. I think I see one of our people trying to—"

A shot rang out. One of the revolving doors spun rapidly. A man caught inside pitched into the lobby with blood streaming down the right side of his face.

"It's Gunther!" Illya cried. Count Lugo Beladrac came through the same revolving door.

Beladrac looked quite sporty in dark slacks, a houndstooth jacket, white shirt, ascot and soft Tyrolean hat. The half dozen THRUSH thugs who crowded into the lobby behind him looked less fashionable. The count caught sight of the two agents and Elisabeth.

Napoleon Solo had to give the count credit. Beladrac was quick. It took the ugly man only a split second to comprehend what must have happened. He let out a bellow of outrage that brought all the startled guests in the lobby swinging around toward him.

"Stop those men! They are criminals! Kidnapers! They are kidnaping my fiancée!"

No one in the lobby knew otherwise. A couple of bellboys began to run toward Solo and Illya. Solo saw a staircase leading down on to their right. "Let's go," he bawled, already running.

Illya chased after him, pausing only long enough to grab the end of an upholstered settee and swing it around into the path of the bellboys. They stumbled against it and fell over the back head first.

Carrying Elisabeth with not too much difficulty, Solo hit the brightly lighted marble stairs leading downward. He bowled a stout, fashionably dressed woman out of the way. She screamed at the sight of the pistols, clutched her bosom and fainted. Above, in the lobby, the shouts of Beladrac and his men in pursuit grew louder.

Solo reached the stair landing, turned and went racing down the other short flight into a brightly lit arcade of shops.

Illya's bangs flew every which way as he skidded to a stop beside his friend. He was first to see the illuminated sign at the arcade's far end.

"That way to the car park, Napoleon."

They ran.

Hatless, Beladrac appeared at the bottom of the stairs. A manicurist popped out of one of the shops and squealed. Beladrac's crew of half a dozen Thrushmen had drawn their guns. So far they hadn't started firing. It would be a different story once they got outside.

Solo was growing conscious of the burden of Elisabeth's weight. Illya reached the little stair beneath the illuminated arrow and dodged through the doorway. Solo followed. Up a short flight of stairs again, and they were outside in the cool twilight.

Lemon-colored clouds drifted near the horizon. The remainder of the sky was darkening as twilight came on. In the east the heavens were full of roiling gray. Thunder muttered.

Their car was parked in the second rack. Solo and Illya pounded toward it. Solo was levering open the rear door with his free hand when a gun crashed.

He ducked instinctively. The window of the door he was trying to open dissolved in a shattering of glass. Bits of it struck Solo in the face. He wrenched to one side, almost fell under the weight of Elisabeth's limp body. Egged on by Beladrac shouting orders in Italian, the THRUSH agents began to fan out among the parked cars.

Crouching, Illya reached up. He levered the door open far enough for Solo to roll Elisabeth inside. Illya stayed low, went up around the front end of the automobile and around to the other side.

From behind the cover of the hood he fired one, two, three shots at the pursuers. A Thrushman peeking out from behind a huge

Lincoln parked a dozen spaces away screamed and slid out face forward on the concrete.

Solo slammed the rear door, reached up and opened the right front. He wiggled up into the seat of the right-hand drive machine, got his keys, turned on the ignition as Illya slid in the other side.

A man was running toward them down the parking aisle. Solo recognized one of the local U.N.C.L.E. agents assigned to help them cover the Hotel Penti. Illya shouted, waved his arms frantically. The agent didn't see or hear. A THRUSH killer picked the running agent off with a single shot. The man fell in a welter of blood.

Under the hood the engine roared. Solo rammed the shift into drive and lurched the car out of the slot. A bullet whanged off the hood. Another shattered the rear window, sprayed more glass against their necks. From the floor of the tonneau Elisabeth moaned feebly.

"Where the devil are we going?" Illya demanded.

"Got to lose them," Solo replied, driving as fast as he dared in the lot.

"Impossible," Illya said. "It's nearly the rush hour. Traffic in Rome at that time is—"

"Maybe it'll help us."

Solo barely touched the brakes as he reached the parking lot entrance. He swung left into the street between two speeding automobiles. The driver of one howled with rage and shook his fist as Solo's left fender caressed the smaller vehicle.

Solo was unfamiliar with the streets of Rome. The twilight made vision difficult. All around him, little cars raced at top speed, headlights and taillights dazzling. Thunder rumbled. Lights had come on in the offices and shops. Ahead, the tide of wild traffic in which Solo suddenly found himself bore to the right, around a traffic circle.

Illya looked out through the broken back window. "I'm sure the count is back there in the Rolls."

Whipping the wheel right, Solo followed the tide of cars around through the traffic circle. The drivers around him manipulated their vehicles as though they were on a race course. Blaring horns and shouted oaths filled the air. The sky was changing from pale lemon to a sinister amber as the storm advanced rapidly toward Rome's hills. The end of the traffic circle was just ahead.

Solo maneuvered to stay in his lane, shot out of the circle and down a wide boulevard where the going was a little easier.

Traffic was still fast here, but it moved in orderly lanes split by a central grass-planted divider. On the right and left were shops. Abruptly the shops on the right vanished, replaced by the wider vista of a giant apartment-building complex in the early stages of construction.

Half a dozen vast superstruc-

tures of steel, fifteen stories high, reared up against the darkening sky. All around the site, bulldozers and other heavy construction equipment stood at odd angles on the slopes of rubble-heaps. Rain began to patter on the windshield.

"I see the Rolls, Napoleon. It's coming up fast behind us."

Solo fumbled in his pocket, drew out his communicator, passed it to Illya. "See whether you can get anyone at the hotel on Channel B. Tell them we need reinforcements."

Illya nodded, began adjusting the calibrations. Solo alternated between watching the traffic around him and the road behind via the rear mirror. He thought he could pick out the gleaming Rolls now. It veered wildly in and out among the other cars in an effort to catch them.

The Rolls was about four cars behind. Suddenly the roof section folded back. A man's head and torso appeared. The man was apparently standing on the rear seat. He brought up a long, cylindrical device with a stock which fitted to his shoulder. The Rolls stopped veering, moved ahead on a straight course.

Solo saw a break on his right, whipped ahead of a van into the curb lane. "Hurry up," he warned Illya. "They've got a launcher back there—"

The *whu-chuff* was followed by a thunderous explosion that rocked the rear of the car.

Solo swore as the back tires blew like giant firecrackers.

Smoke billowed into the car through the shattered read window. The small propectile, fired straight ahead and down from the speeding Rolls, had disabled their car completely. Illya's call to the U.N.C.L.E. agents at the hotel was drowned out in the clang and whine of metal as the car smashed against the right-hand curb, banged up over it, shot out of control across the mercifully empty sidewalk and plowed toward the side of one of the rubble heaps at the edge of the construction project.

"Hang on for—" was all the warning Solo had time to shout.

The car smashed into the side of the rubble pile and rode half way up, stopped. Illya dropped the communicator, hit the door handle on his side. Solo did the same on his. He hauled open the tonneau door, pulled Elisabeth out and sprinted to the top of the rubble heap.

Illya was a flickering shadow beside him. Rain hit Solo in the face as he tossed Elisabeth down the other side of the hill of dirt and gravel and dove after her.

Their wrecked car exploded with a roar of gasoline and a geyser of light and smoke.

TWO

TUMBLING DOWN the rubble heap, Solo knew the intervening hill had saved them. He felt the

intense heat, smelled the smoke, heard the cacophony of horns and brakes and fenders banging together on the boulevard beyond the explosion. Elisabeth lay crumpled at the bottom of the little hill.

Solo staggered to his feet. He felt dizzy. Illya was picking himself up. The sky had lowered completely. The rain began in earnest. Solo searched the surrounding area visually. The apartment construction project was at least four blocks long on each side. The heavy pieces of earth-moving equipment stood out like strange metal animals against the distant lights of buildings. On the other side of the rubble flames crackled.

There was a confusion of sound from the boulevard as more cars piled up. Then, above all the other noise, Illya and Solo quite distinctly heard louder voices, the loudest being the count's: "Half of you search the wreckage. The rest come with me. I think they got out. They must be somewhere among these unfinished apartments—"

"Which is where we'd better be,"

Solo panted, picking up Elisabeth again and staggering forward.

Their only hope now was to cross the project to its far side and find sanctuary among the shops along the brightly lighted street there. As he ran, Solo realized that he'd lost his pistol. Probably in the car. He was gratified to see that Illya still had his gun clutched in his hand.

They reached the first of the steel superstructures. Great raw red uprights set in concrete thrust up out of the earth. Solo and Illya dodged into this square forest. The rain beat down steadily. Behind them, men clattered over gravel.

The two agents had nearly reached the far side of the first open building when a beam of light lanced out of the rain behind them, swept over them, past them, then jerked back.

"There, *there!*" Count Beladrac screamed.

Guns crashed. Three, four, half a dozen shots. The bullets spanged and rang from the steel as the agents raced out of the skeleton of the first building and up another hill of rubble. Illya turned to fire, able to see the pursuers only as moving shadows flitting behind them, uncertain targets in the rain and the gloom and the jumble of angular shapes.

Illya's gun exploded twice. A Thrushman cried out and rolled noisily in gravel. Beladrac continued to shout orders mingled with obscenities as he urged his men forward.

"Not much ammunition left," Illya breathed as they ran again. "Two or three shots."

"Save them," Solo rapped back. "We may need them."

The strange, grim chase continued, the U.N.C.L.E. agents plunging ahead toward the superstructure of the next unfinished building, a towering cage of girders and beams through which the rain slashed more and more heavily each second.

The mud intermixed with gravel underfoot was turning to soup. Solo sloshed along, conscious of the increasing weight of Elisabeth's body on his shoulder. Another shot rang out behind. The bullet plowed off the drum of a cement mixer at the near edge of the unfinished building.

Illya whipped around to see whether he could get a clear target. In that moment, the figures of their pursuers—now down to three men, one of them surely Beladrac—appeared at the top of the rubble heap they'd just crossed. A fusillade of shots rang out from that direction.

Solo ducked instinctively. So did Illya, but not in time. He let out a short, surprised cry and tumbled backwards against the nearest steel upright.

As he fell, his trigger finger jerked out of control. Illya's pistol emptied itself in the ground before he pitched over onto his side.

Now fear rose inside Solo like an evil cloud. He carried Elisabeth back inside the tangle of steel uprights that formed the base of this particular building, laid her down unceremoniously among a litter of lumber, the wreckage of the concrete forms used when the construction crews poured the ground sockets for the uprights. Then he ran back again to Illya. He knelt, thrust back Illya's coat. He felt gingerly at the blackish-wet place on Illya's left side where the bullet hit.

The lower ribs. Whether it was a fatal wound at the moment was impossible to tell. Solo knew it probably would be fatal if he couldn't get Illya out of here. His friend was unconscious, face a bloodless white blur. The rain beat mercilessly on Solo's head.

Knowing he was taking a chance, Solo pocketed Illya's pistol. He lifted his friend and carried him carefully back to where he'd laid Elisabeth among the broken boards. He could hear the pursuers coming, rattling gravel with their feet. The rain hissed. The lights of the shops toward which they'd been running seemed to gleam at the far side of the universe.

With hands that were beginning to tremble a little, Napoleon Solo took Illya's pistol from his pocket and examined it. Coldness ate upward from his belly. Illya had discharged all the shots. The gun was empty.

He couldn't begin to carry both of them, not and go fast enough. Beladrac and his friends were working their way toward him more quietly now, as if they sensed a kill was immanent.

From the darkness someone laughed above the rain. "They are no longer running. We have them, I think."

That was Count Beladrac, all right. Solo laid Illya's pistol aside. He tried to separate the shapes of his pursuers from the surrounding darkness. He couldn't do it. The only light at all in the rubble-strewn construction project was a distant gleam from back on the boulevard where the crash had occurred. There, the glare of streetlamps had turned a murky red in the rain as the fire continued to burn in the wrecked car.

For a moment Solo thought he heard whooping sirens. The Rome police rushing to the scene of the accident? He couldn't be sure.

Carefully he backed up a step, two. He crouched down among the splintered pile of lumber, feeling over the ground for something he might use as a weapon. His knee dislodged one board stacked on top of several others. It fell over with a loud whack. Out in the rainy darkness, a man exclaimed, a low, guttural sound of pleasure. A gun banged.

Solo ducked instinctively. The bullet smacked into a board just inches from where he crouched. A splinter broken loose by the shot

pierced his cheek like a miniature arrow.

"No firing, please," called Count Beladrac from out in the shadows. "I much prefer that we take him with our own hands now. Kill him that way also."

The count's voice fairly dripped with sadism. A click-rattle disturbed the hiss of rain. Solo knew the three men were moving forward again, closing in.

The sound of sirens on the boulevard intensified. He knew the police were arriving. But they would do him little good now.

Because of the angle at which he crouched, Solo could see nothing of the ground between himself and the top of the last rubble-heap he'd crossed. Somewhere in that intervening blackness, the count and his pair of killers moved, rattling a stone again faintly now. Solo's cheeks were chilled with the rain. His fingers closed around the length of board. He hefted it like a club, waiting. He was conscious of the faint breathing of Elisabeth and Illya crumpled in back of him.

"I see him, Excellence," one of the Thrushmen called. "By the board pile—"

"Take him," Beladrac said.

From the right and left, the Thrushmen closed in. As they stood up to run forward, their silhouettes showed against the top of the rubble heap behind them. They loomed like shadow-men, guns clearly defined in their hands.

Well, thought Napoleon Solo, *I never thought it would be here in Rome that I'd finally wind it all up. But you never know.*

A kind of trance fell over him, a cold, emotionless determination instilled into him from the very first day of U.N.C.L.E. training. He'd destroy them if he could. He wouldn't sell his own life cheaply.

The two Thrushmen running at him had already passed the first upthrusting girders at the end of the building. Solo came up from behind the lumber pile, swinging the board like a ball-bat.

He connected with the head of the Thrushman angling in from his left. The man's ear pulped. He screamed, going down. By that time the Thrushman from the right was on him, tearing at his throat, battering at his head.

The Thrushman used his pistol as a miniature club, much more effective than Solo's piece of lumber at close range. *Thud.* Solo took one blow in the center of his forehead. He saw star-patterns, dazzling lights.

He stuck his left foot behind him to step away from the questing hands of the THRUSH killer. His heel slid in a patch of mud. Flailing, he tumbled over on his side. The piece of lumber dropped out of his hands.

"Got him!" the Thrushman chortled. He pulled back his foot, brought it streaking in at Solo's head.

Solo caught the shoe, gave it

practically a one hundred and eighty-degree wrench. The Thrushman clawed air and sat down heavily in the mud. Solo dove forward with his right fist out. He blasted the Thrushman in the jaw. The man snapped over backwards. Taking no chances, Solo hammered his head a couple of more times.

"Ah," said a voice quite close, "we should not have used our hands after all, eh, Solo?"

The count loomed against the distant light behind the rubble-heaps. More red glares had been added back there—the flickering redness of police cruiser flashers revolving in great sweeping arcs. Beladrac's gun barrel shone in the rain.

"I wanted to pull you apart piecemeal and make you suffer. You have ruined the effectiveness of my mission for THRUSH. Now, I suppose, I shall simply have to shoot you and be done. I believe the police have arrived back there. It is more important that I escape, survive and try to recoup—"

Beladrac's voice had grown thick with hate. He was no more than half a dozen feet from Solo now, his immense head clearly limned against the background of lights.

Oddly, Solo didn't feel fear any longer. Perhaps it was simply too late for that. Perhaps the odds were too hopeless. His hand scrabbled around in back of him. He'd lost the larger piece of lumber. He needed something else, anything, with which to fight—

"Will you stand up for the bullet, Solo?" Beladrac asked him. "Or do you prefer that I shoot you as you are, crouching like a whipped animal?"

Something rough brushed against Solo's fingertips. He closed his hand around it, felt along it. It was a short length of lumber, snapped or split off a larger board. It had a sharp point at one end.

The rain slashed against his eyes. Beladrac took another step forward. Solo's eyes had become sufficiently accustomed to the darkness so that certain details of the count's person were becoming clear. He made out the triangle of white shirt front showing between the sodden lapels of the count's sports jacket.

"Very well, Solo," said Count Lugo Beladrac. "I have no more time to waste."

Up came his gun hand, centering, steadying.

Solo gripped the bit of wood, unlocked his legs beneath him and straightened them like steel rods, lunging forward.

Beladrac shot. The muzzle of his pistol spread a little orange smear in the dark. Solo drew his right arm high over his head as he charged.

Beladrac's bullet caught him in the left hip, a crashing, painful force. Solo nearly went down. But the momentum of his charge kept him going. He had one chance, one chance and that was all—

Screaming in alarm as Solo hurtled at him out of the rainy dark,

Beladrac tried to shoot again. Napoleon Solo slammed downward with his right hand with all the force left in him. The pointed end of the piece of wood slashed Beladrac's shirt, drove through skin beneath and buried in the man's chest.

Solo tore his hand away, felt splinters dig into his own palm as Beladrac threw his head back, dropped his gun, clutched at the piece of wood sticking out of his shirt, tried to pull it free with both hands.

Howling, Beladrac turned. He stumbled up the slope of the nearest rubble-heap. At the crest he faltered, still plucking wildly at the piece of wood. He threw his head back again, his white teeth a dazzle in the distant glare of lights from the boulevard. His ugly face convulsed, became even uglier, an unspeakable mask of hate and pain—

Count Lugo Beladrac fell over on his face, and his weight drove the wood deeper into his body. He lay dead in the rain.

Solo heard scuttlings, scurryings. He turned. The two Thrushmen had already fled off through the maze of steel. Solo began calling for the police at the top of his lungs. Presently someone answered him from the direction of the boulevard.

Blood soaked his left trouser leg. He sank down to a sitting position, hung his head, exhausted. The boot-heels of the police drummed closer.

Suddenly Solo lifted his head. An awful smile cracked his lips. He'd just realized how it was that he'd killed Count Beladrac. With a wooden stake in the chest. Fitting, he thought dizzily. Very fitting for a THRUSH vampire—

He pitched over on his side, unconscious in the rain.

THREE

A WEEK LATER, two men and several pounds of bandages could be found in the luxurious little cocktail bar off the lobby of the Hotel Penti.

The bandages were on the persons of the two men, Solo and Illya. Considerably refreshed by several days in bed, each had a drink in front of him. Each looked considerably happier with the general state of affairs than he had while the Beladrac business was in progress.

"When are we flying back to America, Napoleon?"

Solo sipped the drink. "As soon as Elisabeth is released from the hospital. I talked Mr. Waverly into a holiday for both of us. I said I'd escort Elisabeth back to the U. S. personally at the end of our vacation."

"Always the gallant," said Illya, not without a trace of envy.

"Well, I've got to do something to convince her—again—that all

men in the world aren't unprincipled bums and THRUSH agents like the count."

"Have you seen her today?" Illya asked.

"I was at the hospital an hour ago. That file our doctors dug out of the cabinets behind the wall in Beladrac's villa was all they needed. The formula for the THRUSH serum was in the file. A combination of anti-hydrobrionic drugs and fresh human plasma are going to make Elisabeth good as new. It'll take some time, of course.

"But the same treatment can be given to the rest of our people, and eventually all the serum will be gotten out of their systems. Digging out the ones THRUSH already treated is going to take some detective work, but Mr. Waverly feels confident it can be done. Especially now that we know both the symptoms and how to counter-act them."

Just at that moment, there was a commotion in the Penti lobby. Out past the glass doors of the lounge, delegates from the Mid-Eastern Peace Conference could be seen breaking up their session for the day. Solo and Illya swung round on their stools to watch.

Men in white burnouses walked and talked amiably with their conventionally dressed opposite numbers from the other country. A few on both sides even smiled.

"We should be thankful," said Illya, "that Mr. Waverly had duplicates of all of Elisabeth's evi-

dence and was willing to bring it over himself and present it."

Solo merely nodded. His eyes were grave as he thought of what might have happened, had not Waverly himself lent his authority to the evidence from the podium, and convinced the delegates that THRUSH was indeed back of the terroristic incidents that had nearly provoked war.

"Where is the old war horse, by the way?" Illya asked.

"I don't know. Still in the hall with some of the delegates, I suppose. He said he'd join us here."

"Elisabeth's travel case with the original evidence ever turn up?" Illya asked.

"No. Beladrac must have destroyed it."

Mr. Alexander Waverly came into sight in the lobby, appearing to hold a conversation with his right hand. He entered the lounge. Waverly had been speaking into his own pocket communicator, which he now replaced in his breast pocket. He dry-washed his hands cheerfully as he moved up to join them.

"Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin—I wish we had time for a small libation together. Unfortunately we don't. Are your bags packed?"

Illya goggled. "Bags? Napoleon said he'd talked you into a short holiday—"

"Yes, but I just got wind of an urgent matter requiring our immediate presence in New York. I have reservations for us on the two-thirty Air Roma jet to Kennedy International."

"But sir," Solo protested, "Elisabeth is—"

"—coming along nicely," Mr. Waverly concluded. "I saw her myself this morning. I'm afraid, Mr. Solo, that you will have to wait to renew your—ah—friendship."

Solo scowled. "That's how she got tangled up with Beladrac in the first place, because I was so busy I never had time—"

"Tut-tut, Mr. Solo," said Waverly in mild reproof.

"It certainly is a shame, Napoleon," Illya wore a wicked grin. "You won't get to hang round and hold Elisabeth's hand."

"And you're glad," Solo said. "What have you got against romance?"

"Why, nothing," said Illya Kuryakin. "That is, I wouldn't have, if one of the girls ever fell for me. As it is, I call it the proverbial poetic justice."

"I call it unreasonable slavery and servitude," muttered Napoleon Solo.

"I call it working for U.N.C.L.E.," said Mr. Alexander Waverly, unperturbed. "Shall we go, gentlemen?"

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SEPTEMBER. ☐ **THE BRAINWASH AFFAIR** by Robert Hart Davis
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Please print **June—67**

"Here's your half," the hustler grinned.
"And here's yours," I said—and fired.

Chicken or the Egg

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

THE first time I saw Si Rankin he was standing beside his car, stopped on a back road running through orange groves.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about him. He was slender, about six feet, with warm brown eyes and a quick smile. He had a battered attache case tucked under his arm, and I judged him to be a salesman, probably handling a product to sell to orange growers.

My first assumption was correct. Si was a salesman, the best salesman I had ever met, or was ever likely to meet. But what he sold hadn't in the least to do with oranges.

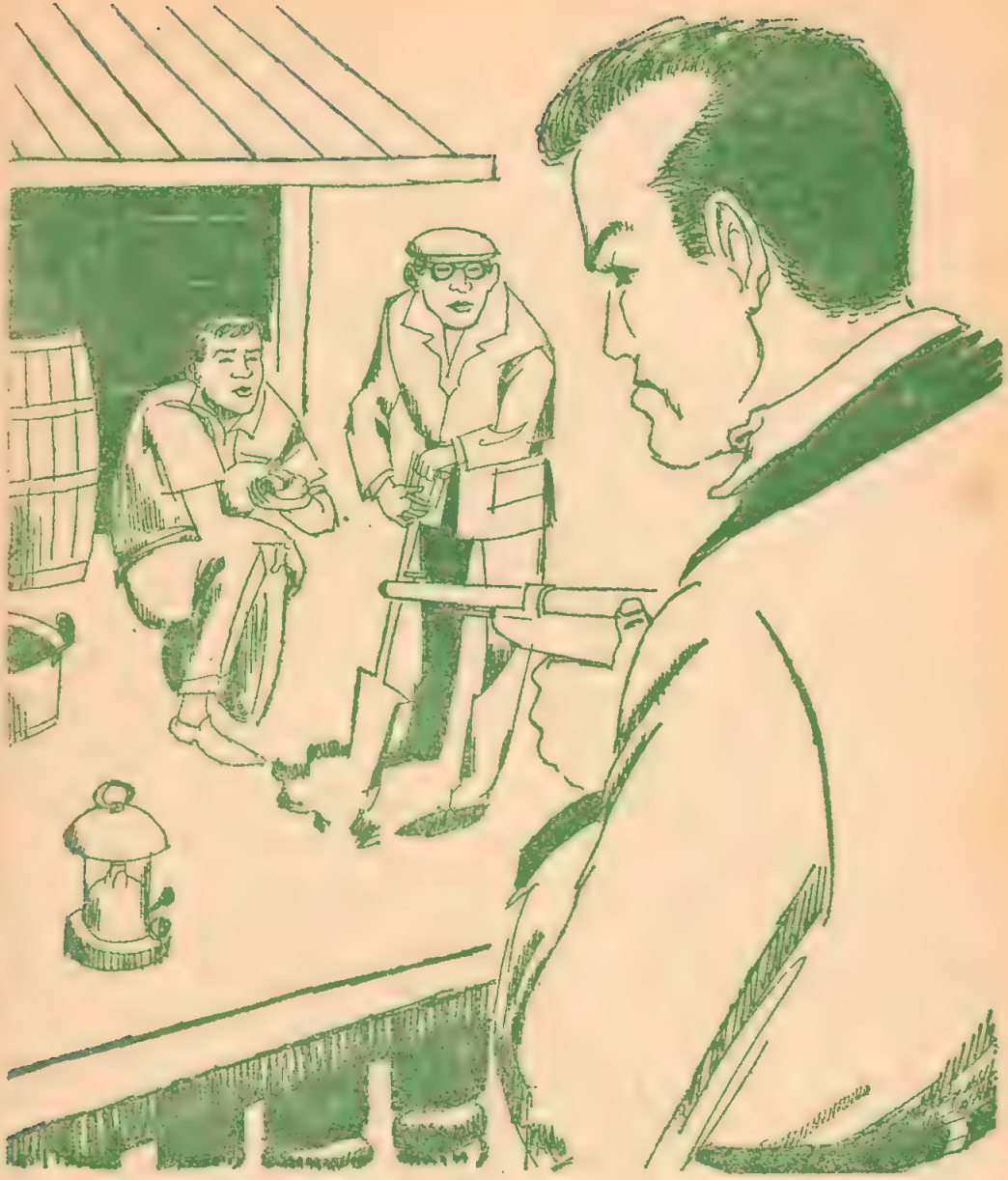
I almost never picked up hitchhikers, but he was well-dressed, respectable looking enough, so when he waved I pulled up beside him. "Trouble?"

His smile was wry. "These rental cars. Mine conked out."

"I can give you a lift into the next town if you don't mind waiting while I make a call on the way."

"That's very kind of you." He got into my ancient car with a glance at the black instrument bag on the seat beside me. "You a doctor?"

"Veterinarian. Roger Templeton."



"Si, Doc. Silas Rankin. I'm a business consultant." He laughed. "You might say we're in the same kind of business. You cure sick animals. I cure sick businesses."

"Have you ever tried to cure a chicken business?"

"I wouldn't know how to begin. Unless it was sick from bad management."

"No, the chickens are sick, not the management. But it amounts to the same thing in the end."

At the Winton chicken ranch I

asked Si if he'd like to come along and watch. He nodded and followed me.

Paul Winton's ranch was fairly large as chicken ranches go. Winton, a balding man of fifty, was in his office. He told me that his egg production had fallen off by more than fifty per cent. He'd tried all the sulfa drugs, hoping it was a virus infection. Nothing had helped.

Si stood by while I checked several pullets for the usual symptoms. I found nothing to indicate any of the common diseases. I got Winton's permission to do exploratative surgery on a hen. I exposed the viscera of a hen.

The trouble was apparent immediately. The egg tract was infected. Probably a new-type virus. The chain of eggs developed to a certain point, then deteriorated.

I took some smears for microscopic study and closed the incision. "I'll take these smears back to my lab and run tests on them, Mr. Winton. Meanwhile, we'll try a nitrofuran."

As we drove away, Si said, "Doc, that was very interesting. I had no idea eggs developed that way in chickens." He offered me a cigar. "Why, you could see three or four eggs in the process of developing inside that hen. Will she recover?"

It was an expensive cigar. I revised my opinion of Si upward. I said, "Oh, yes, the hen will recover."

Si chuckled suddenly. "Which comes first, Doc, the chicken or the egg?"

It was an old gag, one people always tossed at me when they learned I doctored chickens. In strained silence I drove Si into Riverside and dropped him off at a garage. He thanked me, and I drove away, sure I would never see him again.

That was my second assumption about Si that proved to be wrong. My office and lab, with bachelor quarters above it, were in the outskirts of Los Angeles.

Two days later Si called and invited me to dinner, casually mentioning a Hollywood restaurant that I couldn't often afford on the money I made. I accepted his invitation, both from curiosity and at the prospect of a fine dinner.

Si was immaculate in a suit that must have cost him a couple of hundred. He was a genial host. He kept the conversation general while we worked our way through the drinks and two fine steaks.

Then, over coffee, he said abruptly, "What would happen, Doc, if you inserted a tiny object into one of those eggs while it's in the process of development?"

"An object? What kind of an object?"

"Oh, something the size of a pebble. Or a button."

I peered at him curiously. "It's been done. A few years ago at a Poultry Grower's dinner, I saw an

egg broken that contained a pearl. Why?"

His gaze was level. "How much money do you make, doc?"

I stiffened. "That's none of your damned business!"

He shrugged. "No matter. I already know. It's chicken feed, isn't it?" A glint of humor struck his eyes. "If you'll pardon the pun."

"You've got a lot of gall, Rankin," I said huffily.

He shrugged again. "So I've been told. In my business it pays." He leaned over to put out his cigar. "I was impressed by that bit of surgery you performed the other day."

A man in my profession has to take a lot of abuse. Praise, even from someone who wouldn't know a chicken from an alley cat, was a shot in the arm. "Thanks, Si."

Then he spoiled it. "How long were you in medical school?"

"Medical school? What makes you think I was ever in medical school?"

"Doc, in my business it pays to be cautious. I don't take unnecessary chances. I checked you out. I know you were kicked out of med school for selling narcotics. I know you have a taste for expensive blondes. You have, as some sage once put it, a champagne appetite and a beer purse."

I started to get up. "I didn't come here to be insulted!"

"And I didn't come here to insult you. Sit down, kid, and we'll talk business."

I sat down. For the price of the dinner he'd bought me I could swallow a few insults. Not that it wasn't true, every word he'd spoken, but a man doesn't like his dirty linen waved in his face. I said, "Just what *is* your business?"

His quick smile came. "I'm a salesman, Doc. In a manner of speaking I sell greed. Human greed."

And then, calmly, succinctly, he told me what he had in mind.

It was fantastic! I'd heard of salting a gold mine, but Si was going to salt a chicken ranch! I simply sat, staring at him.

"The first thing we'll need is a small ranch. If we can rent one, fine. If not, we'll buy one with as little down as possible."

"And the money to buy this ranch and stock it?"

His eyes glowed with amusement. "One thing at a time, Doc. Besides, we don't need a large flock. Just enough to give the appearance of a going business. How many would that take?"

Despite myself, I was becoming interested. Si was a superb salesman; he was certainly selling me. I said, "That would depend on who was appraising the ranch. Someone with no knowledge of poultry ranching might be impressed by a thousand hens . . ."

Si grunted. "A thousand! That's a lot of chicken feathers."

"If you want to impress someone, it's not. Actually, a rancher

would need twice that many to keep his flock replenished."

Si gestured. "No, no! We're not going into the blasted poultry business! All we want is a front."

"Well, we could set up a small operation with something less than a thousand hens. That would make it look like a going concern to someone who didn't know better."

I remembered a man near Azuza with a small operation. He'd bought into the poultry business without knowing anything about it and had been on the edge of bankruptcy since. He'd sell or rent if he got the opportunity.

"That sounds like just what we want," Si Rankin said. "Can you swing it?"

"For fifteen hundred I can swing it. Buy his flock and equipment, that is. The ranch rent would be extra."

"Fine!" Si whipped out a checkbook and scribbled a check. "We're in business."

My mind boiled with questions. Did he think I would let my practice go to engage in such a wild scheme? But I held my tongue. His confidence and enthusiasm swept me along. I would be first in line at the bank in the morning. If his check was good, what did I have to lose?

I asked, "How long should I rent the ranch for?"

"Oh, a month, maybe two. If we don't pull it off by that time—"

I stared. "Two months! I can't take two months away from my office!"

"Not even for, say . . . ten grand?"

"Ten! You can't be serious!"

"About money, Doc, I'm always serious. You're in for a third of whatever we pick up."

Si's check was good. I hung a sign on my office door, *on vacation,* and drove out to Azuza. The skimpy practice I had would suffer but, if Si's deal went through, who the hell cared?

By late afternoon I had completed my end of the deal. The man jumped at my offer. I bought his flock and equipment and gave him two months' rent on the ranch.

The rancher didn't know me personally. I did business with him as Ray Parks, a name Si and I had agreed on. Then I called Si and told him it was all set. He told me to sit on the chickens until I heard from him.

For over a week I combed feathers out of my hair and shoveled chicken manure. I had never realized how much pure hard labor was involved in running a chicken ranch. I was thoroughly sick of it when Si drove into the yard late one afternoon.

"Hi, chicken farmer," he said with his ready grin. "How's business?"

"I've about had it," I said sourly. "I had made up my mind to start chucking eggs at you if you didn't show up soon."

"Your worries are over, Doc. I've hooked a fish."

I said eagerly, "Then you've got something going?"

"Yes, indeed. Oh yes, indeed!"

I took him into the house, not much more than a shack, a single story, four-room clapboard.

Inside Si said, "I've got the fish." He took a small chamois bag from his inside pocket. "And here's the bait."

I shook out the contents of the bag into the palm of my hand. There were about twenty small diamonds, uncut and unpolished, ranging in size from a chip to about a half-carat in weight.

I whistled. "These must have cost a buck or two."

"They're hot, a piece of loot, so I got them pretty cheap. But I don't want to have to buy any more. Now the sucker I've hooked is a pheasant hunter. The season opens Monday. We'll be out bright and early. We'll ask permission to hunt on your land. Don't give in until I offer you something."

Si went on to explain his plan. They would camp on the ranch for a few days. Si would send the sucker over for a dozen eggs. I was to have three diamond-salted eggs planted in the carton. In addition, I was to implant one hen with a series of stones, graduated in size so the egg with the largest stone would be laid first.

"Will you have time enough to get all that done?"

I considered. "Today is Thursday. That's plenty of time."

"Good! Now the second time is when you sink the hook in. Take him out to the nests and collect the eggs right under his nose. Make sure at least four of the eggs contain the goods."

"I'll use the trap nests and let him collect the eggs himself," I said. "That should convince him."

"Good! Very good, Doc. You're learning." Si grinned. "Now, there's a chance he may try to buy a few chickens. Don't sell him any, no matter what he offers. He buys the whole flock or nothing."

I canvassed the former owner's production charts and selected twelve hens, the top producers. I isolated them to test the accuracy of the charts. Then I converted a corner of the packing shed into a miniature surgery. The operation on the hens wasn't terribly complicated. I used a local anesthetic; this permitted a fast recovery of the hens. Once the oviduct was exposed and the chain of eggs laid bare, it was a simple matter to separate the yolk membrane from the albumen and insert a stone. Three

days after inserting the diamonds, the eggs were laid. I broke one; it was perfect.

Then all I had to do was wait. I was positive everything would go smoothly. For the first time I began to believe Si's scheme would work. Even so, by Monday morning I was as nervous as a hen trying to escape the hovering shadow of a chicken hawk.

They drove up in a new station wagon a little after six o'clock. I'd been up over an hour and was in the bar mixing a batch of mash when they arrived.

The sucker was named Allan Trazer. He was a big man in his late fifties, dressed in new, expensive hunting clothes. His face was florid, with the high color of good living. His blue eyes were shrewd, appraising, with a reddish hue. His handshake was as soft as he looked.

Si did most of the talking. After some argument, and a twenty slipped me in plain sight of Trazer, I agreed to let them hunt the ranch. They camped about a hundred yards down the road. The ranch was far off the main highway, so they wouldn't be bothered by much traffic. I hadn't seen three cars pass in the time I'd been there. I watched until the wagon was parked in a clump of trees, then returned to the batch of mash.

Thirty minutes later I heard a sound behind me. I turned to see Trazer in the doorway. "I wonder if you could sell us some eggs?"

I shrugged. "That's what I'm in business for. How many?"

"I guess a dozen will do it."

"Come along," I said. I led him out to the storeroom, where I crossed to a crate that was only partially filled with egg cartons. I took out the carton with the salted eggs and gave it to Trazer.

I charged him fifty cents for the dozen eggs.

Trazer gave me a fifty-cent piece.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Parks." He tucked the carton under his arm and left.

I let my breath go with a sigh. Well, the fish had the bait. Now it was up to Si to sink the hook in.

I got little work done the rest of the day. Momentarily I expected Trazer back for more eggs, but he didn't come. Several times during the morning I heard shots in the distance.

By mid-afternoon I was convinced something had gone wrong. Maybe Trazer wasn't as gullible as Si thought. Long after dark I was in the kitchen with a TV dinner and a bottle of beer when there was a rap on the door.

It was Trazer. He stepped into the spill of light from the open kitchen door. His eyes had a strange glitter, and his round face was clenched tight with avarice.

"I hate to bother you, Mr. Parks, but we had a little accident." He laughed nervously. "Si dropped the eggs. Broke every damned one!"

I made a clucking sound. "That's too bad."

"I was hoping—maybe you'd sell me another dozen?"

"I don't know," I said with a show of reluctance. "I've packed all the eggs for today. I'd have to open a case—"

"I'll pay you for your trouble." He took out a half dollar, then another.

I let my gaze linger on the money. "Well, I'll check the nests and maybe I won't have to open a case. I have to release the birds anyway."

I took him out to the largest coop where the trap nests were. I had set the stage earlier. There was a row of forty nests, but only twelve were sprung. I explained the purpose of the trap nests to Trazer, then made a big production out of recording the band numbers of the hens while he collected the eggs. Of the twelve he selected, four had been implanted with diamonds.

Trazer said gleefully, "These are what I call fresh. They're still warm!"

Once the man had the eggs, he couldn't get away fast enough. He thanked me, mumbled a hurried good night and scampered off.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I had the taste of big money in my mouth. There was a blonde I'd dated a few times. She was expensive. But when this caper was over—

I went back in the house, finished dinner and fell into bed.

Shortly before midnight I was awakened by a noise outside. I went to the bedroom window. There was a full moon, and I could see two men out by the coops. My first thought was chicken thieves. Not knowing what I was getting into with this set-up, I'd brought along my .38. It was under my pillow. I made a move toward it, then I recognized Si.

The man with him, of course, was Allan Trazer. I could see *what* they were doing, but the purpose behind it escaped me.

Si had a bushel basket, and Trazer was scraping loose soil from the ground and shoveling it into the basket. Once I saw Si straighten up, holding his back with one hand and gesturing with the other. Trazer shook his head vigorously and went on shoveling. After about a half hour they left, carrying the basket between them. Shrugging, I returned to bed without the least idea what it was all about, but I was sure Si would explain in due time.

It was just getting light when a loud banging on my door awoke me. I threw a robe on and hurried to the door. Si stood just outside. His face and hands were filthy, his clothes covered with dirt.

I stared. "What the hell!"

Si grimaced. "We've been mining. We screened a half acre of this blasted place!"

"Screened?" I asked him. "Whatever for?"

"Trazer thinks the stones come from the soil. He thinks the chick-

ens pick them up while they're eating."

"While they're eating? Why, those hens never even touch the ground!"

"You know that. I know that. But Trazer doesn't know it. At least he didn't. I think I've finally convinced him. And I'm beat. I haven't closed an eye all night." He laughed abruptly. "I told Trazer I was coming over to steal a couple of chickens. Do you have that hen fixed? The one with several eggs salted with the goods?"

"She's ready. She's ready to start laying."

"She won't get a chance to *lay* anything. We're going to open her up. This is the clincher, Doc. When he sees the goods in those eggs, Trazer won't be able to get his money up fast enough. He drove into town yesterday. I know it was to pick up some money."

We went out to the coops, and I gave Si the hen that had the stones in her eggs. I picked another at random.

It was too late to go back to bed. I was far too excited to sleep, anyway. I made myself some breakfast and went out to the coops. I fed and watered the hens, a chore I was thoroughly sick of by this time.

An hour later I saw Trazer hurrying alone up the road toward the house, a brief case under his arm. As he stopped before me, Trazer glanced nervously back over his shoulder. "I want to talk to you, Mr. Parks. Can we go inside?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine, fine!" He took my arm and urged me toward the house. "I just want to talk."

I let him hustle me inside. "What's this all about?"

"Parks, what will you take for this ranch?" he asked. "Including the chickens and everything, naturally."

"What'll I—I don't want to sell. I'm just getting started." I gaped at him. "Besides, I don't own the ranch. I rent it."

"All right, the chickens then! I'll buy the chickens!"

The door burst open, and Si stormed into the room. "You low-life, double-crossing rat!" he shouted at Trazer. "You thought you were going to leave me out in the cold, did you? Well, you're not going to get away with it!" Si whirled on me. "I'll double his offer, whatever it is!"

I glanced from one to the other in pretended bewilderment. "He hasn't offered me anything. I just told him I don't want to sell."

"I'll give you ten thousand," Trazer said.

I groped for a chair. "Ten thousand!"

"Twenty thousand!" Si snapped, glaring at Trazer.

"Thirty!" Trazer roared.

The whole thing reminded me of an auction, but without an auction-

eer. One wasn't needed. Trazer's greed was all the goad required. The bidding went up and up at a dizzying pace. If it had been left up to me, I would have given in early. But, in some strange manner, it was taken out of my hands. Si ran the whole show.

And then Trazer bid sixty thousand dollars!

Si threw up his hands. "That tops me. I can't go any higher."

Trazer went to the table with his brief case.

Si winked at me. "Trazer, the least you could do is cut me in for half."

I sat up straight. Was he out of his mind? What if Trazer—?

"Not a chance," Trazer said without looking at me. "If you'd got here first, you'd've cut me out and you damned well know it!"

Trazer motioned me to the table, opening the brief case. It was filled with neat stacks of bills, all hundreds, some old, some new. Quickly Trazer took out the money, nearly emptying the case.

"There's your money. And here's," reaching into his coat pocket for a slip of paper, "a simple bill of sale for your chickens, everything but the ranch. You just sign it and our business will be finished. Then you can leave any time, as soon as you show me how to feed and water the chickens. I'll want immediate possession."

As I sat down to count the money, Si said, "Wait until I get my

stuff, Mr. Parks, and I'll ride into L. A. with you. I can't stand the sight of this louse any longer." He left the house.

The money was all there. I signed the bill of sale with the phony name. Trazer trotted at my heels as I packed my bags, then followed me outside. He was making sure I took nothing I shouldn't.

Si, puffing on a cigar, was just entering the yard. Ignoring Trazer, he threw his bags in the back and climbed in on the front seat, carelessly dropping his old attache case on the floorboards between his feet. I got under the wheel and drove away. The money was in my instrument bag on the seat between us. I'd had to dump all my instruments. That was all right; I didn't figure on needing them ever again. Glancing back through the rear window, I saw Trazer trotting toward the coops. He wasn't wasting any time.

Through the cigar smoke Si said, "You can drive me straight to the airport, Doc. I'll be on the first flight out. We'll split the money on

the way. Which reminds me . . ."

Before I could stop him, he'd picked up my black bag, put it on his lap and opened it.

"What are you doing?"

"Counting the money. What else?"

"It's all there. I counted it."

"I'm sure you did, Doc. But I never feel a caper's complete until I've added up the take myself."

Alternately puffing on the cigar and humming tunelessly to himself, he counted the money. Finally he sighed gustily. "Yep, it's all there." He snapped the bag shut and tossed it back on the seat between us. "Well, we pulled it off, Doc. There's nobody easier to con than another hustler."

"What do you mean? Is Trazer—?"

"Oh, I don't mean he's a con man. But how do you think he got all that money?" His grin was cynical. "He had to hustle somebody to get it. The only honest man, Doc, is a poor one."

"Yeah, I guess that's right," I muttered.

"Doc, if you ever find out, let me know, will you?"

"Find out what?"

"Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" He threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Those were the last words he spoke to me. As he turned his head to throw the cigar out the window, I took the .38 from my pocket and shot him in the back of the head.

I buried Si, along with his bags, a half mile off the road in a grove of trees. I had picked the spot days ago. I buried the gun with him. It couldn't be traced to me. I'd stolen it in med school when I was peddling narcotics.

The only danger was the chance I'd be seen burying him. I wasn't. I was home free. Trazer didn't know my name. And nobody would ever miss Si. A con man has few acquaintances, and certainly fewer friends.

Driving away, I said aloud, "Now which comes first, Si, the chicken or the egg?"

I felt I deserved a night on the town. I thought of the blonde, but she could wait. Tonight was mine alone.

I went to the restaurant where Si had first unveiled his scheme to me. The dinner was very good, the brandy superb, and I was filled with a sense of well-being. The waiter came with coffee and a dollar cigar I'd ordered. He placed his little tray holding my bill at my elbow. I dropped one of the two hundreds I'd brought with me onto the tray.

I lit the cigar and leaned back to enjoy my coffee. My mind spun with plans for the future. I'd give up my practice, of course. If Si could dream up a sweet deal like this one had been, why couldn't I? Who needed him?

After a time it occurred to me that the waiter had been gone too

long. I felt a pull of apprehension. Then I saw him approaching, a tall man in dark clothes flanking him. They stopped at my table.

"Is this yours, sir?" the tall man asked, holding out the hundred dollar bill.

My heart began to pound. "Why, yes. At least I gave the waiter—"

"Will you come with me, please?" He held out his other hand, a hand holding an open card case.

"What's the trouble, officer?" I said. My voice wasn't too steady.

"We'd like to ask you some questions about this bill. It's counterfeit."

I heard an echo of Si's laughter. "There's nobody easier to con than another hustler."

And I recalled his counting Trazer's money while holding my bag in his lap, his own attache case on the floorboards between his feet. Almost under my gaze he had switched bills on me. The good money was in his attache case, buried with him out there in those trees. It was the only possible explanation. Trazer wouldn't have dared pay me in counterfeit; he would have to stick around too long to risk it.

One phony bill I might have explained. But how could I explain the stacks and stacks of them in my apartment?

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Wherever science fiction buffs meet, whenever stories of the weird and occult are discussed and evaluated, Manly Wade Wellman's name crops up. And for a very sound, valid reason—Mr. Wellman, for more than two decades, has been an "author's author"—the standard bearer of quality by which all others in his field are judged. A prolific producer, a frequent contributor to WEIRD TALES, *Mr. Wellman says that Up Under the Roof is "based strongly on what happened to me more than half a century ago . . ." It is a rare privilege to include it in our Department of Lost Stories. It deserves its place there. From time to time, in this magazine, you will see this department. When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its length, whatever its field, has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. It is a very special treat we bring you this month. Manly Wade Wellman was always one of the best, and this story is one of his greatest. Read it. You won't forget it for a long time.* ***THE EDITORS***

WHEN I was twelve years old I lived in a shabby old two-story house, built square below and double-gabled up above.

The four gables contained an upstairs room apiece, each facing in a different direction and the entire four making a cross, with a hall and a stairwell at the center. The front and side rooms were ceiled and plastered and painted, for use as bedrooms, but the unfinished rear chamber held only a clutter of trunks, boxes and broken furniture.

That part of the upper floor was hot and dusty in the summertime, and it was left open right up to the peak of its gable. Directly above its doorway to the central hall gaped an empty dark triangle, that led to the slant-sided cave above the bedroom ceilings.

Because it was so full of lumber, this unfinished room was called the garret, though it was not a real garret. The real garret was that dark space, up under the roof.

I was the youngest person in the house by more than a generation, and my youth seemed to offend everyone bitterly. I was constantly re-

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minded of my childish stupidity and inexperience. Nobody felt that years would make me any wiser, and in time I grew to share that opinion. I tried never to make a statement or venture a suggestion that had not been voiced previously by one of my elders. Even at that, I came in for plenty of snubs and corrections, and repeated admonition that little boys should be seen and not heard.

So I learned to keep my own counsel. The downstairs parlor was full of books, and I read in them a great deal, including nearly all volumes of an old Encyclopedia Brittanica. This taste for reading attracted some curious attention on the part of my guardians; occasionally one of them would say that I must be trained for the law or the ministry. I was never consulted as to my own ambition, which would have shocked the entire household. I wanted to be a deep-sea diver.

That summer was a hot one, and my room, in the gable on the right or northern side of the house, had only one window. The sun's rays fell directly on the outside of the room's sloping walls, which were only the plastered-in pitches of the gable, and which offered little insulation.

Even by bedtime, my room did not cool down. I slept poorly, bothered by strange and vivid dreams. Sometimes I started awake in the darkness, sweating and tingling, and lay there as I listened to the rustle of the cottonwoods in the yard and the creaking of the old house timbers.

After a while, I am not sure exactly when, I began to hear something else at night.

Awareness of that sound grew upon me, first slowly and faintly, then with a terrifying clarity, over a number of hot, wakeful nights. It was something up above me, between the ceiling and the peak of the roof, something big and clumsy and stealthy.

I remember telling myself that it was a rat up there, but the very moment the thought came into my head I knew it was a very silly thought indeed. Rats skip and scamper; they are light and swift and sure. This movement was huge and weighty, of a bulk that I judged was far beyond my own; and it moved, I say, with a slow, unhandy stealth that had a sustained rhythm of a sort.

It did not drag or walk, but it moved. Years afterward, I was to see through a microscope the plodding of an amoeba. The thing up under the roof sounded as an amoeba looks, a mass that stretches out a thin, loose portion of itself, then rolls and flows all of its substance into that portion, and so creeps along. Only it must have been many, many thousands of times larger than an amoeba.

Before long, I was hearing the noise of that motion every night. I would wait for it, lying awake in

bed, until the moment it made itself heard and humped itself across the ceiling above me.

Always fear came with it, fear that did not diminish with time. I would stare into the hot gloom, my tongue would dry up between my teeth, and my fingertips would smart as though they had been rubbed sore. On my back would sprout and fan and winnow little involuntary wings of chill, that made my spine shrink and quiver as though ice came and mingled with the marrow.

The ceiling, I knew, would descend some night. It would descend upon me like a great millstone being lowered, and then it would crumble about my bed. Something huge and soft would wriggle free of the broken bits . . .

There could be no talking about any of this, I knew very well. Long before, I had learned that nobody in the house would listen or care. As I have said, I was scorned and disliked by all those others. Once, when a neighbor boy of fifteen gave me a terrible beating in the front yard, everyone watched from the parlor windows, but none stirred to help me, not when I thought I would fall dead at my enemy's scornful feet. When he got tired of pulping my face with his knuckles, he turned away at last, and I dragged myself in and was tongue-lashed on all sides for an hour.

Today I cannot remember exactly what was urged against me, only that the tears I had not shed for pain welled forth under the scolding. Things like that made me hesitate about asking for help or anything else. One morning at breakfast, I did dare to inquire if the others had ever heard anything strange, up under the roof; but I was only reprimanded for interrupting a discussion of local politics.

That night the noise was louder and more terrifying than ever. It began somewhere above another of the rooms, and then it trundled along my ceiling, slower and still slower, until it paused immediately above my bed.

At that moment it seemed to me that the lath and plaster were no tighter or stronger than a spider web, and that the bulk up there was incalculably more dire than the very prince and father of all spiders. I was certain that it crouched there, almost within reach of me, that it gloated and hungered, and that it turned over in its dark subpersonal awareness the problem of when and how to come and take hold of me.

As for me, I could not have stirred from my bed, could not even have cried out for help.

The thing and the fear of it were with me always, night after night and week after week, until a day late in the summer, a dark and rainy day when it did not wait for nightfall.

I was alone in the house that day, and I had grown tired of hear-

ing the rain and the dank swish of soaked leaves outside. I looked at the books in the parlor, but I had exhausted all that interested me.

Then I remembered a stack of illustrated magazines, very old, in a corner of the lumber room. I climbed the stairs and opened the door.

The lumber room was unthinkably ugly and close, and a sort of brown light reflected from the unpainted joists and the insides of the shingles overhead. I found the magazines and began to paw through them.

Up to then, there had been no sound except for the weary rain outside. But as I leafed through one of the magazines, there came a slow, muffled hump-hump-hump from above me, from that dark opening that led into the space above the ceiling. I knew that something sly and heavy was there, looking down upon me.

In one scrambling moment I had fled into the hall and downstairs and to the front door. I grabbed the knob, then I stopped and thought.

It was no swelling of courage that made me pause before rushing out, only a hopeless but sensible consideration of what must follow. I could leave the house and go into the rainy street and mope there until someone came back. Then I would have to come back, too, and in time night would fall and I would have to go to my room and go to bed in the dark.

Then whatever made the noise would come down. It would wait no longer, for it had seen me and my tortured terror. It would flow to the floor and come in at my door and creep up on my bed. Then I would know how it looked, and what color it was, and what it wanted with me.

All these things I pondered, and from somewhere came a cold determination that stiffened my limbs and my neck like new sawdust poured into an empty doll. I left the front door unopen, and walked back through the house to the foot of the stairs. There I paused, and tried to lift my foot to the bottom step, but I could not.

After a while, and I think it was a fairly long while, I turned and walked to the back porch. There, upon the wood box, lay a hand axe. It was dull and rusty and wobbled upon its helve, but I took it in my hand and went back in, and this time when I came to the steps I mounted them.

It was a slow journey, one step after another, with long, tight breaths between. The old boards creaked under my shoes, as if aghast at my rash ascent. I gained the upper hall, and now I did not hesitate, but went back into the lumber room.

The brown light had darkened since I had first come there to find the magazines. I stood in the middle of the floor and made myself look up at that triangular opening,

and that took a mustering of all my will power, but there was nothing to see there. I stuck the handle of the axe down into the waistband of my knickerbockers, and dragged a heavy, dust-laden old bureau across and pushed it close against the wall beside the door. Upon that I placed a broken-backed chair, and upon the chair a candle box.

Finally I climbed up on the bureau, up on the chair, up on the box. My chin rose level with the threshold of the black cavern, and it was like gazing into a pool of ink.

I peered and listened. With both hands I got hold of a cross-timber and drew myself slowly up. The candle box tipped over and fell from beneath my feet, striking the floor boards with a crash like an explosion. But next moment I had dragged myself up inside the loft. The roof peak came so low above my head that I could barely rise to my knees.

The axe still hung in my waistband, and I was heartily glad I had brought it. I pulled it out and tried to hold it in my mouth, like a pirate's dirk. But it was too big and heavy, so I kept it clutched in my right hand. Then, crawling, I went forward on top of the rafters.

Every inch took me deeper into darkness, and when I reached and made my way past a big rough chimney I might as well have been in a coal mine for all the light that came to me.

But if I could not see, I could feel, and so I groped my way. First I went straight to the front of the house. I kept the axe poised for a blow as I felt all along the boards, and into the corners. The dust made me want to cough. When I had explored that area, I dragged myself around. I could see some feeble glow of light when I looked toward the far end, past the obstruction of the chimney. Crawling back, I explored gropingly the space above the south bedroom. Last of all I made myself venture into the loft above my own room.

I found nothing.

Those are the three words I always finished with when, grown up enough to be listened to, I told this story in later years. And one or two listeners have spoken of the undefined and sometimes malevolent psychic forces that now and then afflict children on the brink of adolescence. But I knew then, and I know now, that there was something, or that there had been something, that was a mortal peril until I drove myself to face it. If I had done anything else that day, it would have come looking for me that night. And I do not want to guess what would have happened then.

But from that time forward, there was not the slightest murmur of sound up under the roof. I slept so soundly that I had to be shaken and shouted awake in the mornings. And I never knew real fear again, not even in the war.

FADE OUT—FADE IN

by ED LACY

AS THE HARBOR has a three-man police force, I usually come on at ten and work straight through until about seven or eight at night, when parking and traffic is pretty heavy.

This morning I was up very early, because low tide was due at four forty-five and I was out in my boat, trying to get a couple bushels of clams.

My salary is low, so, like most Harbor men, I do some clamming whenever I can.

I was one hundred yards out from the beach, working the long, scissor-like digging poles, doing real good, when a car stopped on the beach, headlights flashing on and off. Then the siren sounded, once, and I got up anchor and rowed in.

Jack Harris, our night shift officer, was waiting. The words almost burst from his mouth: "Chief, a guy was murdered at the motel! *Roy Burns!*"

I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. The Harbor's a 1049 population village in fall and winter, with maybe two thousand summer tourists. We've never had a major crime, much less a murder: all my police work has been petty thefts, running in drunks, ticketing speeders. Jack's fleshy face had a troubled look and then I got it.

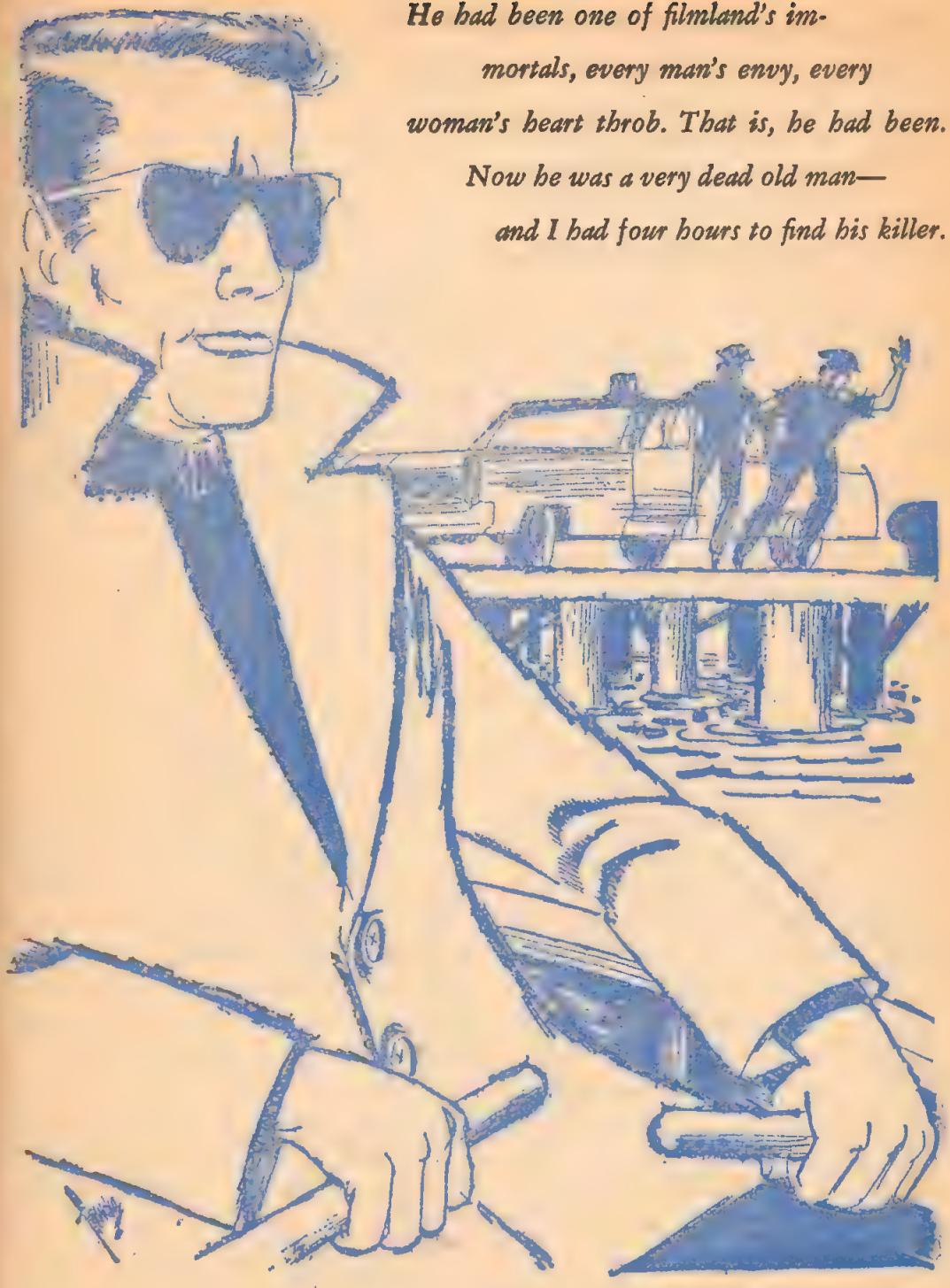
"You mean Roy Burns the movie star?" I asked.

"That's right, Dave. Funny, they were showing one of his old pictures on TV last night. My wife couldn't get our kid to bed because of that and—"

"Yeah, I saw part of it, myself," I said, tossing the anchor on the beach and getting into our one police car, with Jack.

I told him to drive me home. I

He had been one of filmland's immortals, every man's envy, every woman's heart throb. That is, he had been. Now he was a very dead old man— and I had four hours to find his killer.



was sick, any murder was bad enough, but for a famous movie star to be killed meant lots of lousy publicity for the Harbor. Nor could I help but think of the spot I was in—the eyes of the country, the world would be on our little police force.

Changing into my uniform, I shook my ten-year-old-boy awake, told him to take care of the rowboat and the clams I'd dug before he went to school.

Then we drove to the motel, with Jack giving me a fast rundown. "Crazy killing, Dave. Somebody entered through the window and beat him to death.

"Wasn't robbery; Burns had two hundred and fifty bucks in his wallet, plus a couple of big rings and an expensive watch. He checked in after nine last night as R. Burns. Charlie Owens says he had no idea he was the famous actor. He don't look nothing like his movies, he's a little old man now. Of course all those movies on TV were made about twenty-five years ago.

"Anyway, it seems Burns was on his way to Montauk when his car conked out, so he had to spend the night at the motel. He told Charlie that and I've checked with Herman at the gas station. The car's still there with a busted carburator valve."

Jack glanced at me in the windshield mirror. "Dave, I already called County Homicide. I mean, what the hell, that's the law."

"Sure. You did the right thing, Jack."

I knew exactly what Jack meant, County would want to take over, claiming this was too big for a hick police force.

Doc Mansfield, who doubled as the Harbor's coroner, a state trooper and the County Homicide man were at the motel when we got there. Homicide said, "Hi, Chief. This was the blunt instrument." He held up a small hunk of pipe. "Killer wore gloves. No prints. I'll take this back to our lab. I guess you'll need our help on this, so—"

"It's my case. If I need help I'll let County know," I grunted, staring at the battered body of this little old man. The pillow was all bloody.

Doc said, "Horrible, Dave, just horrible. He was struck again and again after he was dead. Seems the work of a maniac. Pending an autopsy, I'd place the time of death at about two-thirty in the morning.

I nodded. I didn't have my notebook with me, wrote the death time down on the back of a book of parking tickets. The County man took me aside. "Now listen, Chief, this is going to be a headline case. You'd best let us take it over."

"I'll handle my own work. However I'd appreciate it if you'd dust the room. Our fingerprint outfit isn't much. And I could use one of your photographers."

"Sure, we'll cooperate, but it would be best if we took the case. Make things easier if we—"

"No, I'm in charge."

Charlie Owens, who often went chumming for blues with me, came in. "What a mess, sheets and whole bed ruined. This will about kill what little business I do off-season."

"Forget business, Charlie. This is a murder." For the first time I noticed that, except for the bloody bed, the rest of the motel room was in order. "What time did he check in?"

"At nine-thirty-five last night. He said his car had broken down. I had no idea he was *the* Roy Burns. Think of this, Dave—I was watching one of his old pictures on TV when he registered. In fact, he watched it himself for a moment, I keep an old TV set in the office and he never said a word about it being him there on the screen. Of course the fellow we were watching was young and trim and—"

"Who discovered the body, Charlie?"

"Me. I always get up early and I noticed the window wide open, the curtains blowing. Well, it was a mite too cold last night for a wide open window, so I looked in and—Dave, I got sick."

"Charlie, think carefully. When Burns checked in last night, did he seem nervous, afraid?"

"Not a bit. He made a call to Montauk, in the office, explaining

to somebody how he wouldn't be out until morning. They must have offered to drive in for him because I overheard him say, 'Thanks, but I might as well stay here, pick up my car in the morning.'

"Then he asked where he could get something to eat and I told him the diner was the only place in the Harbor, told him to walk down Main Street, couldn't miss it. I heard him return at about ten-thirty. The commercial was on. Burns went to his bungalow."

"Anybody else register last night?"

"Not a soul. I had some fishermen over the weekend, but nobody since, except Burns. I was watching TV until midnight, so he didn't have any visitors up until then."

Doc Mansfield asked if he could take the body to Ralph's undertaking parlor, to perform the autopsy. The County Homicide man, who looked disgusted, said it was okay. I told Jack to stay there, asked the Homicide man to let me know if he came up with any prints.

Driving over to the cottage, which is the phone company build-

ing, I asked Mary Gruppo to check on that Montauk call. She said, "With this new automatic dialing stuff, it will take time. Dave, is it true about Roy Burns being killed here in the Harbor last night? It was on the radio."

"It's true. It's damn important I get that Montauk number, Mary. Call me the second you have it."

"Imagine him being in the Harbor! I once saw Gary Grant on a street in New York City. I nearly passed out. What does Roy look like?"

"A couple pounds of hamburger, right now."

When I reached my office in the old building that's a combination city hall, police station, fire house and post office, Buster Gaines, who doesn't report until six, was waiting, along with Hank Sims, the supermarket cashier who also works as a special cop on Sundays. I was glad to see my men on the ball, but they started throwing questions at me. I sent Hank home, told Buster to start the morning patrol of Main Street. It wasn't eight but my phone began ringing, a reporter from Hollywood calling.

I told him, "The Harbor police force is working on the case. No other comment." I no sooner put the phone down than a New York City paper called.

From the window I could see Hank gassing with Fred Holmes, the carpenter. I went to the door and yelled for Hank to come back, take care of the phone. It would be ringing all morning, plus reporters and photographers descending on the Harbor soon.

It was almost comical to hear Hank's self-important tone as he said, "All we can tell you is that the Harbor police are working on the case. Sure, call later, if you want. We expect a break soon."

But I was hardly in a comical mood as I sat at my desk, wondered how to start on this murder. At eight Larry Haff, the druggist and mayor of the Harbor, dropped in. "How's it coming, Dave?"

"I'm working on it."

Larry rubbed his bald head. "Dave, can you handle this? You know what I mean."

"Hell, Larry, this isn't a movie. A murder isn't solved in an hour!"

"Dave, Dave, don't get riled. For my money you're the best police chief we've ever had. What I meant was—well, I run a good drugstore but now and then I get a call for some unusual medicine and I have to send to Riverside for it. No reflection on me; I'm not supposed to carry every medicine on the market. The thing is, the Harbor is going to get a lot of bad publicity and it will be worse if our police don't solve this."

"Larry, if I'm in over my head, I'll call County detectives."

"Fine. That's all I wanted to know. I have confidence in you, Dave."

When he left I sat there, Hank

busy answering the phone. I wondered if I wasn't acting like a horse's end. I'd never been near a murder before and Roy Burns had been a big Hollywood star for year sand years, how could I possibly know who his enemies were? To solve a killing you need some link between the killer and the victim and such a link could be in Hollywood, New York, Paris, any place. How could I—?

A Jag roadster stopped in front of my office and a tall man with brushed gray hair got out, wearing expensive slacks and a suede windbreaker. Striding into the office he asked, "Who's in charge here?"

"I am. I'm the Police Chief." My words had a hollow sound.

"My name is Harrison Parks. I just heard the terrible news on the radio. I have a place at Montauk, Roy was coming out to spend a few days with me."

It was my day for VIPs. Parks was one of the high society guys who'd bought estates all over this end of the Island since the war, a big man on Wall Street and all the rest.

Hank called from across the room, "Dave, Mary has the number Burns phoned last night!"

"Okay, put it down and thank her." I glanced up at Parks. "I guess that's you."

"Correct. Roy phoned that his car had broken down. I wanted to drive in, pick him up, but he said he'd wait until morning, for his car. How I wish I had insisted on coming in for him!"

"Sit down, Mr. Parks. Who was at your house last night?"

"My wife, myself and the servants, of course."

"Had you known Mr. Burns long?"

"Oh yes, we are—were—old friends. I once financed a movie company of his, back in 1937."

"Do you know if he had any enemies?"

Parks flashed white teeth in a grin. "In the old days Roy had plenty of enemies. I don't mean people who'd want to murder him, but you understand how it is in the movie business. You don't reach the top without stepping on somebody's back. But Roy hadn't been in pictures for years."

"Was he married?"

"Four or five times. His last marriage was in 1950 and only lasted a couple of years."

"Any children?"

"No."

"Any girl friends?"

The flashy grin again. "I doubt it. Roy was over sixty-three."

"Was Burns well off?"

"Indeed. Roy hadn't been in pictures since '55. He appeared in a Broadway play in 1957. It was a flop and he gave up acting. For the past ten years Roy lived abroad. Oddly enough, he was making more money now than at the height of his fame. Fortunately he owned many of his old movies and

sold them to TV for a bundle, capital gains, you know. He also had interests in a plane company, real estate in California and a fine portfolio of solid stocks, which I handled.

"He flew in from Nice a week ago, to see about selling a parcel of Los Angeles land. He took in the Broadway plays, was to spend a few days with us before heading west. Chief, Roy was my friend and if there's anything I can do, if you need private detectives to help you, why—"

"I don't need any private badges. Mr. Parks, are you going back to Montauk now?"

"Yes."

"All your servants still there, today?"

"Of course. I don't—What are you driving at, officer?"

"Nothing. I may drive out later for some routine questioning. Far as we know now, no one knew Burns was coming here, except you, your wife and your help. I may want to talk to them."

"This is sheer nonsense! Are you implying that—"

"Mr. Parks, I'm not implying anything. I have to follow any and all leads I have. I only said I *may* drive out."

Parks left in a huff and my nerves were really on edge. A Harbor police job isn't civil service nor does it carry a pension. While I was positive the town council would back me every step of the way—after all my folks had lived here for generations and we Harbor people stuck together—still a rich joker like Parks could put on a lot of pressure.

Telling Hank to stay on the phone, I crossed Main Street to the diner for coffee. Steve Paulous was busy serving breakfasts. The coffee helped my headache and when I got Steve aside he said, "Dave, isn't this something, a big time actor in my diner and I never even knew it."

"Steve, when Burns came in last night, who else was in here?"

"Nobody. I was getting ready to close and there was nobody except some local kids having sodas. Burns ordered a hamburger, I remember he said no butter on the bread or any onions, then he asked for a beer. He took orange juice when I explained I don't have a beer license."

"Are you sure nobody else came in then, or right after Burns left?"

"No, Dave. When Burns left I herded the kids out and locked the door, started cleaning up. Why?"

"Nothing. Routine police work."

"A rough one, hey, Dave?"

I tried to smile. "A little rougher than that fifteen pound blue you landed last year."

"You'll get the killer, Dave, I know you will. I'm sure."

I thought: "I wish to hell I was as sure!" as I finished my coffee and walked out.

The County man was waiting in

my office. Hank said, "My God, Dave, we've been getting calls from Chicago, Hollywood and—Oh, that pest, Mrs. Jenson called. Her damn poodle is lost again."

I sat at my desk and County lit a cigar, told me, "No prints except Burns' and the motel owner's. The killer came through the window while Burns was asleep, probably, beat him and left by the window.

The ground's too hard for any footprints. Chief, you'll need plenty of men for this. Let us take the case."

"I told you I'd call if I need help."

He was a burly man in his fifties. Over cigar smoke he said, "Look, Chief, I'm not telling you your business, but the first few hours after a crime are the most important, can't be wasted. This is a big league killing and—"

"And I'm a small town cop?" I cut in.

He blew out a cloud of smoke. "Okay. You said it, I didn't. Face facts. Like I put in fifteen years on the New York City Homicide Bureau, I've had a lot more experience in murder than you. That's a fact. Nothing personal, merely a fact. The rest of the county squad are big city detectives who retired to the country, started working for the County. A three-man police force can find a lost poodle, but solving a killing requires plenty of men, fast action."

"Any slides go with this lecture?"

"Chief, don't get on your high horse, I'm only trying to help, point up a few facts. For example, we have a communications section which can contact police headquarters in a dozen cities at the same time."

"I haven't been on the case for more than two hours. You solve all your murders within a few hours?"

"Okay, okay. But by noon the Harbor will be full of reporters. Don't make a fool of yourself."

"I'll try not to."

He shrugged his beefy shoulders and left. For a second the office was quiet. Hank said, "Dave, maybe we should call in County? This is big, very big."

"So everybody has been telling me! This is our case and I want a crack at solving it. You want to call in people, get on the radio and tell Buster I want him. And Jack, too."

"Whatever you say, Dave."

I sat at my desk, trying to think, watching Main Street come awake, kids on their way to school, wives doing their shopping. I knew them all by their first names. Small town stuff.

When Jack and Buster were in

the office I told Hank to take the receiver off the phone. Then I said, "I've set a deadline. If we can't come up with any clue, a link of some kind, by noon, I'll let County take over. That gives us about three hours. Now, the way I figure, we've got one thing going for us that County doesn't have: we *are* small town cops! Not even a town, merely village cops. Okay.

"About the case, I see it like this: unless it was the work of a passing nut, and the odds are against that. Whoever killed Burns was a man or woman who must have hated his guts a long time. Burns hadn't been in movies for years, or even in the U.S., so somebody suddenly saw him, remembered an old score, killed him."

"You think he was followed out here, from New York City?" Jack asked.

"Possibly, but I doubt it. First, Burns spent a week in New York, so the killer could have knocked him off there. As for following him to the Harbor, the killer had no way of knowing the car would break down or that Burns would spend the night at Charlie's motel."

"Unless he fixed the car to break down?" Hank said.

"Stop it. Then he, or she, would have loosened a steering nut, made it a fatal accident. Another thing, if Burns was being followed, the roads coming out here are lonely at night. The killer could have easily forced Burns' car off the road and murdered him. If the car and corpse had been left in the pines, it might be days, all winter, before it was found. Look, you're not getting our angle: *we're village cops!*"

"Sure, but what's so special about that, Dave?" Jack asked.

"It means we know everybody in the Harbor! It also means we know that no Harbor person was ever connected with the movies or with Burns. I want you and Buster to start asking around, find any newcomers to the village. Like anybody who's only been here for a few days, a week, even a month. In short, somebody we don't know."

Hank said, "Dave, we'd hear about an outsider. I'd see him at the supermarket—ain't no place else for him to buy food. And you know the village gossip, soon as there's a guest at anybody's house, you hear about it. It's different in the summer, with all the tourists coming and going. But now, only strangers in the Harbor would be the weekend fishermen and they leave Sunday night."

"Let's give the idea more thought," I said. "Somebody here in the Harbor did murder Burns. Maybe there's a relative visiting one of the truck farms out in the country, maybe on a farm where nobody comes into the village to shop more than once a week?"

"The gossip would still have it," Hank said. "Mom Barry has newcomers at her house, two more grandchildren. The way her daughters have kids, you'd—"

"Damnit, cut the clowning, Hank!" I growled. "Let's take the stores, one by one. Have they hired any new help?"

"Hiring?" Jack said. "In the fall they lay off people. And if they had jobs, they'd give it to a Harbor person. The marina's shut, so no new yachts or cruisers in. I—"

"Wait up," Buster said. "Steve hired a dishwasher last week. Some old rummy who came in for a handout. You know how he hires these vags, nobody in the Harbor wanting the job."

"An old rummy?" I said, sitting up straight. "Burns was an old man and Burns was in the diner last night; maybe we have a link! Buster, bring him in. No rough stuff, I only want to talk to him. And don't mention Burns to him."

Some ten minutes later Buster brought in this wiry little man with shaggy gray hair and the red eyes of a wino. He was wearing worn seersucker pants and a torn work shirt, but they were clean. The old man didn't act frightened, in fact he sort of held himself with dignity.

He said his name was Fred Wilson, asked firmly, "What is this? Are you out to railroad any stranger in town because there's been a killing?"

"Sit down, Mr. Wilson. Nobody is railroading you." Something about him tickled my weary mind. If his clothes were clean, his big face was dirty, in need of a shave. "We merely want to ask a few routine questions. Like, where were you working before you came here?"

"Odd jobs, sir. I tried picking spuds out at the Denson place, but it was too much for a man of my years. Let's see: in June I was washing dishes at a bar outside Riverside. Forget the name, but it's painted a gaudy pink. A bar is the wrong place for me to work. They sacked me for taking a bottle. Then I got a job in a Bay City stool joint, washing dishes. That closed Labor Day. I worked with a carny outfit for a few weeks, but they folded for the season. Then I bummed my way here."

"Why here, Mr. Wilson? Why didn't you head for New York? More jobs there?"

He smiled, showing a few stumpy teeth. "Quite true, but there are also hordes of job seekers and fewer openings for an old man."

I studied him for a moment, wondering what there was about him which vaguely bothered me. "Ever been arrested?" I asked, innocent like.

"Ah, the standard police question. I have, sir, more times than I can count. But always for being a vag or being crocked. The bottle is

my sole comfort in old age. A hollow crutch, I must say."

"I'm going to take your prints, send them to—"

Wilson jumped to his feet. "Sir, I know my rights!" he thundered. "You can not fingerprint me without my consent, unless I'm charged with a felony, or suspected of a crime!"

"Maybe we suspect you of stealing a poodle. Are you afraid of being printed?" I asked, my ears ringing.

"Indeed not, sir. It is not fear but a matter of principle. I have read the recent Supreme Court decisions, know you can not—"

I held up my hand; I knew what had been tickling my mind. "Mr. Wilson, you speak very well, project your voice. Were you ever an actor?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Look at me. Do I look like an actor, sir?"

"I'll ask the questions. Were you an actor?"

The red eyes stared at me boldly. Then he sat down quietly, pulling at a nonexistent crease in his worn pants. "All right, an end to this shabby farce. There's no point in my running, not at my age. I was an actor, one of the best, sir!

"You see the filthy shell of an old man before you; I do not blame you for failing to recognize me. Neither did Roy. That's what drove me out of my mind. There sat the wealthy and famous Roy Burns, in a diner because it was the sole eating place in town. And there I was, hands in dish water, clothes a shambles. Roy glanced at me and didn't even remember me! It was too much!"

"You mean you were in pictures with Burns?" I asked.

He nodded. "It must be difficult to believe, seeing me now, but once I was fair of face, groomed for stardom. You saw me on the telly last night. In the movie I was Roy's buddy; we were the two small time punks recruited by the syndicate to—"

"I saw that. Burns' pal was an over-handsome guy . . . *You?*" Hank cut in as I glared at him.

Wilson turned his gaunt face in profile, smiling sadly. "The nose has been broken in several brawls, my eyes no longer blue, the hair has lost its golden tint. Yes, I was overhandsome, as you so quaintly stated. That was over thirty-five years ago, another lifetime. Last night's pix was the first Roy and I did together, one of the first of the wretched gangster cycle.

"My role was larger than Roy's; it was supposed to be *the* leap up the ladder of fame for me. Fate played a miserable trick on Fred Wilson. The tremendous b.o. success of the pix triggered the string of movies about tough hoods and I was too handsome. Extra bits and finally oblivion for Fred Wilson. Roy made many gangster movies, went on to fame and for-

tune. All of which should have been mine, sir! I was to become the star, not Roy!" His booming voice filled our office again.

"And you blamed Roy Burns?" I asked.

"I blame no one but the fickle finger of Fate. I was the rising movie actor in those days, with several feature roles to my credit.

"Roy was merely a Broadway chorus boy in his first movie role. On seeing the rushes, they rewrote his part, both our parts, enlarged them. Fate smiled on Roy and goosed me into failure. Frankly, sir, I had accepted my lot, turned to the bottle for solace and became a bum. But once they started showing Roy's old pictures on the telly, it was a bitter pill to see myself again, young and handsome, a good actor, then watching my roles reduced to mere walk-on bits, my career fading.

"Even bitter as that was, I could take it, but last night—it was as if the devil had set me up for the final kick in the face! On the telly was this first picture we'd made, the largest role I'd ever had, the pix which was to make me a star. Well, it came up for Roy. As a topper, there was Roy himself at the counter, looking great for a man our age in his good clothes. It was a pill too bitter to swallow."

The office was blanketed with silence as the powerful voice died.

"Did you speak to Mr. Burns in the diner?" I asked.

"What for? To show him I was a dish washer? No sir, I did the only thing I can do well these days; I got stoned."

I said, "But you did go to the motel, later. Did Burns refuse you a handout?"

"Oh yes, I went to the motel, later, when I was able to walk." The thin shoulders squared. "A handout? You are quite right, sir, the tragedy is that I had no pride left, that I did go there for a handout. Oh, I'm certain Roy would have given me money, showed me pity. He could afford to be generous and he always was a decent sort.

"I tapped on the window, too ashamed to knock on the door. He didn't awaken.

"I opened the window and then, like a spotlight, the moonlight showed his fancy bag with the foreign labels on it, the expensive clothes on a chair. I saw Roy Burns sleeping without a care in the world. As the corny line goes, 'There, but for the grace of God . . .' Instead, I was a wino, so high I still had my rubber gloves on, the ones I use while washing dishes.

"Yes, there was Roy sleeping in my bed, so to speak, while I stood in rags, asking for a handout. I lost my head, entered the room and struck out in a blind rage. It wasn't Roy I was wacking, but that lousy harlot, Fate, who'd rooked me!"

There was another heavy silence in the office. I broke it with:

"Where did you get the lead pipe from, Mr. Wilson?"

"I had it in my back pocket."

I nodded. That made it premeditated murder—maybe.

"I've carried that old pipe for years. In this sick world, an old man like myself is always being rolled and attacked by these young punks. Well, what now?"

The voice was projected again, hit me like a blow. "Mr. Wilson, I want you to understand your rights. You have confessed to murder, before three witnesses."

"Of course." He brushed his wild hair with long fingers. "I felt sorry for what I'd done to Roy, although he had a good life. As for me, what's the difference if I end up as a rummy or in a blaze of bad publicity, my failure exposed to the public? It no longer matters, to me. Now, I am exhausted, murder lies heavy on the mind, as Macbeth probably said. Sir, can I lie down?"

Motioning for Jack to take him to our one cell, I said, "Mr. Wilson, I'd like you to dictate a confession, what you've just told us, and sign it. However, it's my duty to also tell you that you don't have to. That's your right."

"I shall dictate it and sign it, sir. I have nothing left to hide. Who knows, perhaps the public may even understand my frustration. I say, I am frightfully bushed. Can I have a beer, perhaps?"

"I'll get you coffee now, have lunch and a beer ready by the time you sign the confession. Buster, go next door and get Anna, the steno, from the mayor's office. Meantime, Mr. Wilson, you can rest in a cell. Reporters and photographers will undoubtedly be here shortly. But if you don't wish to see them, that's also your right."

He gave me a small bow. "I shall rest, dine and be ready to see the press. Sir, could I borrow a clean shirt and tie? You see, the ham within me isn't completely dead."

"Sure."

When Jack had taken Wilson away, Hank was staring at me with his big mouth opened like a hooked fish. I said, "Okay, Hank. Put the receiver back and stop gawking at me. Then go out to the motel, keep that room locked, don't let any reporters or photographers in. You understand?"

"You bet, Dave—Chief."

Hank dashed out and for a moment I was alone in the office. The phone rang. I answered it on the third ring. It was the County D.A. He snapped, "Now see here, Dave, I insist that you let us handle this investigation! This isn't the time for petty politics or—"

"What investigation?" I asked, saying the word slowly—and how sweet it tasted! "I have the killer in a cell, will have his written confession in a few minutes. It's ten forty-three, meaning it took me about four hours to solve the murder. Not too bad for a hick cop, now is it?"

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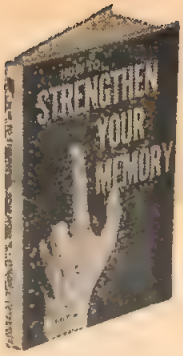

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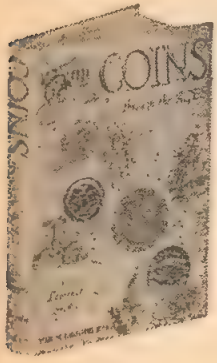

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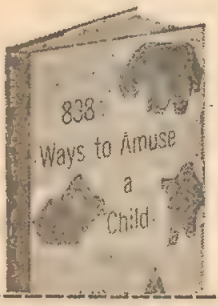

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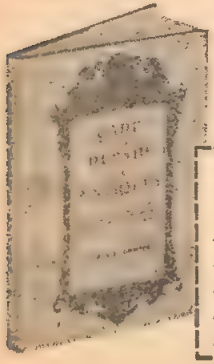
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A Print for the Record

by EDWIN P. HICKS

IN HIS ROOM on the second floor of the Jackson Mortuary, Barney Snodgrass sometimes was amused at his own cleverness.

For two years now he had laid low, and the FBI had been completely baffled.

He had studied their uncomplimentary photographs in the post-office of the way he used to look when he was doing time at Leavenworth—a thin-faced, blond young man.

The picture had been taken ten years ago, along with his fingerprints following his capture after the fiasco of the Kansas City savings and loan robbery, when the driver of the get-away car had got them mired in a traffic jam just five blocks from the scene of the hold-up, and he had been captured with the money and had received a ten-year prison sentence.

He had got out of Leavenworth seven years later, a much wiser criminal, and promptly proceeded to knock off the same savings and loan firm in a solo job—killing the executive vice president and a customer who tried to interfere. He had invested most of his "earnings," $15,000, in three other savings and loan institutions across country, and had been in hiding ever since, the last two years as a handy man at the Jackson mortuary.

Many a night he lay there laughing in the dark, wondering what good old Mr. Jackson would say if he knew that Clint Stauffer, one of

Somewhere out there in the night lay a headless corpse—with the prints of the world's most wanted man. I smiled. Soon I would be out of that shadow of the gallows—thanks to him.

the ten "most wanted" men on the FBI list, was good old Barney, his humble handy man.

Barney didn't have blond hair anymore. He had dyed his hair black. His face also was much fuller than it had been ten years before, and he sported a mustache, also dyed black.

He was living the life of a respectable bachelor with an excellent room, bed, and television set, a passable salary, and the use of a mortuary utility car anytime he wanted to drive around when off duty. But he wasn't happy. He knew that one of these days the FBI would ferret him out. He would be executed, or at the least receive life, and no man could be happy with this hanging over his head.

Then one day the police came out to finger-print the body of a man who had been found dead in the street. His wallet was missing, and there was no way to identify him.

Barney was familiar with finger-printing procedure—too familiar, from his Leavenworth experience and from half a dozen other brushes with the law prior to this.

And suddenly he had an idea! When Sid White, the police finger-print man wasn't looking, he slipped a couple of blank finger-print cards from his kit. Working with India ink in his room that night, after two or three trials on pieces of cardboard—he blacked his fingers and placed his own prints in the proper places indicated on the blank cards which he had filched from the identification officer. He placed the set in a manila envelope and stored it at the bottom of his dresser drawer and was very careful from then on always to lock the door to his room whenever he was out.

It was two weeks later that he ran into Luigi Levetzzi, a small-time crook with a small-time crook's imagination. He was mainly a transient drifter, with no relatives, no past that he wanted to speak of, and certainly no future. Luigi was just about his own size and he had known him at Leavenworth, where he was spending a couple of years for violating the Dyer car-theft act.

Luigi was broke and on the verge of knocking off a drugstore which he had been casing for a couple of nights, when Barney bumped into him.

Sitting side by side in a darkened motion picture theatre that night, Barney whispered a glowing story about the First National Bank here in Biswell Springs. The little city on the Arkansas-Oklahoma state line, population 10,-891, had the bank, two drive-in theatres, one railroad, one union bus terminal, an airport, twenty churches, three drugstores, and the best Little League baseball program of any city its size in the Southwest.

But of course he and Luigi were mainly interested in the bank. When the time was right it could be knocked off with a pop-gun. But it might take a few weeks of waiting before he sent him the word. Was Luigi interested?

Luigi was, but he had to be staked to a room and eats. This was agreeable to Barney, who slipped him a hundred bucks in advance, told him to rent a cheap room and have a telephone installed. In the meantime Luigi was to keep his nose clean. The bank job should net them some twenty—twenty-five thousand!

And now Barney suddenly became a fisherman. He bought an Oklahoma license and went across the state line to fish in a strip pit two miles from town. Stripping operations had ceased twenty years before, and the mile-long strip pit had been filled by the flooding Arkansas River years ago.

Long time residents had given up fishing in the strip pit. While there were good bass, the walls of the pit were so steep and the water was so deep, few were ever caught. Nevertheless Barney Snodgrass fished the strip-pit every time he was free for two weeks—and always came home with an empty stringer.

But he did learn a lot about the strip-pit—that nobody ever visited there, and that a car could easily be hidden behind some bushes and the great hump of earth, shale and slate which had been excavated from the pit during the coal stripping operations.

It was Saturday afternoon. Homer Jackson grinned when Barney drove the utility truck into the mortuary garage and stepped out with a spinning rod in one hand and an empty fish stringer in the other.

"You do beat all, Barney!" Mr. Jackson said. "You've gone fishing every hour you had off for the last two weeks, and you haven't caught a fish yet."

"I'm a real sportsman, Mr. Jackson," Barney said, grinning. "I put all my fish back."

Barney chuckled. As long as Mr. Jackson thought he was really going fishing, everything was just fine. He took his fishing equipment to his room on the second floor of the mortuary, changed his clothes, came down again and went to the office to let Mr. Jackson rub it in on him again about not being able to catch any fish.

Mr. Jackson was closing up. He placed the burial association ledger in the bookkeeper's desk drawer, put cash and checks received during the day in a file folder under "M" in the metal filing cabinet, returned two or three other folders to their proper places in the files, locked them up, lit a cigar and grinned at Barney.

"Well, Isaac Walton, it's all yours—I hope until Monday. It had better be, because Bill and his

wife are going water-skiing on Tenkiller, and Harry says he wants to take his family on a drive through the mountains. Not a body in the house, and I hope it stays that way. You know what to do if something does turn up."

"Sure," said Barney, as he began sweeping out. "I'll call you. You be at home all day?"

"Got to, with everybody else out of pocket. Say, Barney, I'm real serious about wanting you to take that course in embalming. I'll pay all expenses. It wouldn't take long, and look what it would mean to you."

"Nope. Too old, Mr. Jackson. I appreciate your offer, but a forty-five year-old-man is pretty set in his ways. Like it is, I'm free to go and come as I like, except when I'm on duty. I hope I'm earning my salary."

Jackson clapped him on the back. "You are Barney. You are. Here, have a cigar." He gave Barney a cigar and then held a light for him. "I just wanted to help, and I could use another embalmer. But I see your point of view too."

Barney paused in his cleaning up work. "You're not leaving a thousand bucks or so in that file case, are you? It makes me nervous all during the week-end."

Jackson laughed. "How many times have I told you that nobody robs a funeral home? Everybody's scared of dead bodies. But rest easy this week end. There's nothing much—about seventy-five dollars in cash and a hundred dollars or so in checks. Nothing to worry about."

"I wasn't worried about thieves," said Barney. "In case the place should catch fire I don't want to be risking my neck for a measly fifty dollars or so."

"This place catches fire, let her burn. We got insurance. You know what to do—get the bodies out if there are any on the place."

At 2:30 on a Wednesday morning three weeks later, there was a call from a mortuary in Muskogee. An elderly man had died at the home of relatives in Muskogee, and he had a policy with the Jackson Burial association. The family wanted the Jackson Mortuary to handle arrangements. Should they bring the body, or would Jackson call for it?

"We'll call," said Barney.

"What time will you be here?"

"Oh two-three hours. That all right?"

"Sure. Somebody will be on duty. Just ring the door bell at the back."

After he hung up, Barney called Luigi.

"Thank God," said Luigi. "I couldn't have stood it another week."

"You remember your instructions?"

"Well if I don't, I ought to have my head examined. What you think I been doing these last five

weeks besides reading comic books, watching TV, and keeping an old woman from making love to me?"

"Transportation?"

"You know that's my job. I've had a car staked out over a month. Owner's out of town three-fourths of the time. He won't even know we've taken it."

"Good. You know where I'll meet you."

"Yes. Nine-thirty on the nose."

"See you."

Barney called Mr. Jackson, told him about the Muskogee call, so that he could come down or get one of the other fellows down to the place, and then hurried down stairs to the utility car. He stuffed a leather brief case under the seat, and then drove sedately down town.

In front of the bank he paused. Main Street was deserted except for The Grill, where three cars were parked. He looked at his watch. It was exactly 2:45. He stepped on the gas and headed westward across the river bridge and into Oklahoma. The speedometer, once the bridge was reached, held steadily at sixty. It was best not to drive too fast, because Luigi and he wouldn't want to attract attention and there was always the chance of meeting a State Highway patrolman.

A mile and a half beyond the bridge he turned a curve and there was the strip-pit, off to the left.

Barney drove the utility car behind a towering mound of dirt and brought it to a halt. It was exactly two and one-half minutes from the time he had left the front of the bank building. He chortled happily. He and Luigi could pull off that bank job and get away clean and easy, barring some dub fool blundering.

He got in the car then and drove to Muskogee, where he ate a hearty breakfast, read the morning newspaper, listened for a spell to the radio—he was ahead of schedule—and then called at the mortuary for the body.

AT NINE-THIRTY, as Barney was starting to slow up to turn into the shale road by the strip-pit, his rear-view mirror showed two cars following him some two hundred to three hundred yards back. He pulled over to the side of the highway, as if he wanted to check the tires. After the two cars had passed, there was nothing else in sight either way, so he shot ahead then, turned briskly into the strip-pit road, sped around the mound

of slate rock, shale and dirt, and hid the utility car behind a screen of locust trees.

Luigi was waiting there, behind the trees, in a shiny red Buick convertible.

Barney leaped out with his leather brief case and hopped into the Buick beside Luigi. There was a sub-machine gun on the floorboard hidden by a newspaper. He picked up the newspaper and held it in front of his face, as if he were reading it, while Luigi drove the two miles into town.

"The only thing I don't like about this whole deal," Luigi said, "is after we drop this Buick having to ride back to town with the corpse back there."

"Think of it like you would if it was just a sack of flour or something like that. I used to feel like you do, until I got used to being around bodies."

"But I ain't used to it yet," groaned Luigi.

"It's the only way," snapped Barney. "And if they stop us and want to search I'll rap on the window and you get in that basket under the body fast. When they open up and see I've got a dead body in there, they'll tell me to go ahead."

"I hope to hell they don't stop us."

"Not one chance in a thousand they will. But not being prepared for an emergency cost me seven years in Leavenworth."

"Okay," said Luigi, "I'll do it, but I sure hope I don't have to. What kind of a body is it?"

"A man. An old man."

"Geez! I hate old men!" Luigi groaned.

"Chances are we won't even be stopped. I'll park in front of the florist, for a second, and you can slip out. Tomorrow at four I'll have your money for you at the theatre, same place we always meet."

"Now you're making sense," Luigi said.

LUIGI DROVE THE car into the first space in the bank parking lot, twenty feet from the rear door. He sat low in the seat and held a handkerchief in front of his face as if he were about to sneeze.

When Barney's head appeared from behind the newspaper, there was a Hallowe'en mask on his face. The newspaper dropped over the tommy gun, hiding it from the eyes of any passer-by. The brief case in his left hand, partly hid the Hallowe'en mask. He stepped quickly through the bank door, to meet a young girl who was coming out. He threw his arm with the briefcase around the girl's neck and dragged her back in the bank.

"This is a hold-up!" he shouted. The muzzle of the tommy gun swung in a semi-circle. "Everybody drop to the floor, face down. Pronto!"

They dropped.

He shoved the briefcase through the window of the first teller's cage.

"Fill it up with bills—tens, twenties! Hurry before I get nervous and start shooting!" The woman teller obeyed with trembling hands, then collapsed. Barney thrust the case through to the next teller.

"Hurry!" he shouted. The man complied, and when he had finished, the briefcase was stuffed to capacity.

Still holding the girl and the case filled with greenbacks with his left hand and arm, Barney backed to the rear door of the bank. Then he gave the girl a shove towards the floor and fired a burst of shots over the heads of the prostrate bank officials and the frightened customers. Then he ran out of the building and leaped into the car beside Luigi.

They raced away, careening around the corner of the parking lot into traffic and narrowly missing an on-coming car. They headed down Leander street, which paralleled Main Street, cut across on Fourth to Main, and then Luigi really opened her up on the bridge.

"Slow down! Slow down to sixty!" Barney yelled.

Luigi, who had panicked, calmed slightly, and the speedometer dropped back twenty miles an hour to seventy.

"That's better!" Barney said. "We don't want people noticing us over here."

They rounded the curve, and it was clear sailing—not a car in sight for a mile. So Luigi rammed the gas peddle to the floorboard and sent the big red car slashing along the shale road and behind the sheltering dirt dump at the strip-pit.

"Okay!" said Barney.

They jumped out, and Luigi ran around the Buick and headed for the rear of the mortuary car. When he did so, Barney let him have it in the face with the tommy-gun. Luigi slumped to the ground like one of the sacks of flour Barney had told him about, and then Barney stood over him, firing the tommy-gun into his head until there was nothing left.

He threw the gun into the water of the strip-pit. Hurriedly he removed Luigi's wallet, thriftily took out the bills, and tossed the wallet into the water. He stripped off Luigi's coat, put a heavy stone in it, and dropped it also into the strip-pit. He doubted if there would be any identifying marks on any of Luigi's possessions—there wouldn't be if he had followed his instructions carefully. But he wasn't taking any chances.

Barney got into the funeral car then, pushed the briefcase back under the seat where it wouldn't be seen, and drove out into the highway, heading back to town. It was nine-forty-five! He stepped on it.

As he neared the bridge, a police car, its red rotating light shin-

ing, its siren wailing, was coming towards him at the far end of the bridge. The driver of the police car braked to a screeching stop, signaling Barney to halt. It was Remmy Callison, the assistant chief. "See anything of a red Buick convertible going like hell?" he asked.

"No I didn't, Remmy. What's happened?"

"Robbed the bank. Two fellows in a red Buick convertible. How far you come from?"

"All the way from Muskogee. Got a body in the back," Barney told him.

"Then they're bound to have turned off somewhere!" said Callison. He stepped on the gas then, talking into the mike as he pulled away.

When he got to the mortuary, sirens were screaming all over town. The law was going wild.

Mr. Jackson and the staff were huddled about the office TV set, when he entered. The office girl had one ear to a tiny transistor radio. "They don't know exactly, but they say the robbers got off with twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars!" the girl squealed. "Isn't it exciting! I bet that poor girl he grabbed was scared to death!"

At two o'clock that afternoon the police came, dragging in Luigi's headless body.

"You know what!" Remmy Callison greeted Barney. "No wonder you din't meet that red Buick convertible. They had turned off at the strip-pit.That's where we found this guy with his head blown clear to hell by that hold-up guy's tommy-gun. We're going to drag the strip-pit for the gun. It's bound to be there."

"Gosh!" said Barney. "Then he must have switched to another car, and I bet I met him heading west right after he killed this fellow."

"You sure must have," said Remmy. "Do you remember anything unusual about any of the cars you met?"

"Nope. There were a hundred or more I met on the way. Maybe two hundred."

"Well, I'm sending Sid White out to finger-print this guy. His own mother wouldn't recognize him and him not wearing a head."

A couple of the officers laughed approvingly at Remmy Callison's little joke.

When they had gone, Barney hurried to his room and dug out the manila envelope with his sets of finger-prints in it—his own finger-prints. He took it downstairs under his coat and slipped it beneath a corner of the rug in a slumber room next to the preparation room where Luigi's body had been placed.

In due time White arrived from the police station and began taking Luigi's finger-prints. Barney hung around watching, as if fascinated by the operation. Mr. Jackson came in also and watched the pro-

cedure, and Barney began perspiring beyond all reason.

This was the most ticklish part of the whole business. If Jackson didn't leave the room, he was sunk, and poor Luigi had been killed for no real purpose. The timing on this part of the operation was most important—and more difficult than the bank-robbery itself.

At last, as White was finishing up, Jackson left the room. Barney followed quickly after him. There was a telephone booth in the corridor. He took down the receiver and dropped a dime in the slot. He heard the operator's voice.

"Just a minute, operator," he said.

Barney hurried back to White, who was putting the newly processed prints in a folder.

"You're wanted on the telephone in the hall, White," he said.

"Where?" said White.

"The phone booth in the corridor. Here, I'll watch your things for you."

White turned then and started for the phone booth. Barney jumped for the hiding place of his own set of prints in the slumber room, pulled them out of the envelope, then substituted his set in place of poor Luigi's fingerprints. He wadded up Luigi's cards and dropped them in the wastebasket.

"Somebody's nuts," White said as he came back into the room.

"What's the matter?"

"The operator said somebody here called her."

"Darn! Operators are always getting calls mixed up. They don't know straight up. How's fishing these days, White?"

"Haven't caught a bass or crappie in the last two trips to Tenkiller. The weather's so hot, they must be down fifty feet."

"Must be," said Barney.

THE NEWS was astounding! The FBI finger-print files showed that the man whose head had been blown off by the tommy gun was Clint Stauffer, who was one of the ten most wanted men on their list.

Other finger-prints, taken from the steering wheel of the get-away car were identified as that of Luigi Levetzzi, alias Luigi Leone, a small-time hoodlum who had served a term in Leavenworth for car theft at the time Stauffer was an inmate, and he had served numerous jail sentences around Chicago and Detroit.

Evidently, the law reasoned, Luigi had double-crossed the master criminal, Clint Stauffer, once they had pulled off the local bank robbery and he had got his hands on the money, which was now estimated at $23,000, most of it in tens and twenty dollar bills.

Of course there were other blurred finger-prints in the car, some of which could not be identified.

But part of a print on the door

the officers were quite sure had been left by Stauffer.

Barney Snodgrass sat up late night after night in his room at the funeral home, gloating over the masterly way he had pulled off the perfect crime. Not only did he have $23,980 in his brief case, he had wiped the slate clean for Clint Stauffer. All he had to do now was watch his step for a few weeks, and the world was his oyster.

A month passed and then another. And then he told Mr. Jackson that he was homesick and he was leaving.

"Home," he told his surprised employer, was Kittery, Maine, where he once again could hear the sound of the ocean, where he could go fishing every day if he liked, or trap lobsters. He once had been a lobster fisherman there. He planned to get a part time job if he could, putter around, and settle down.

"All right, Barney," Mr. Jackson said regretfully. "We'll miss you, but there is one thing I want you to do before you leave."

"What's that?"

"You've got to find me another man to take your place and break him in before you leave."

"Okay," said Barney, "it's a deal."

Next day Barney found a likely looking boy, about twenty years old, by the name of Elzy Logan, and he brought him before Mr. Jackson for approval.

Jackson waved his hands. "He's your baby, Barney. You picked him, you train him. If you think he's okay I think he is."

So Barney began putting Elzy through his paces. The first week he showed him how to dust and clean out the place, how to service the car, gave him the full works. He also helped the staff initiate him to the fear and horror of the preparation rooms and the slumber rooms.

The boy caught on real fast, and Barney more or less put him on his own the second week while he wound up his business, did a little shopping, and prepared for his own departure at the end of the month. He showed Elzy all through the mortuary with the exception of his own room, and that he kept locked at all times. He told Elzy this would be his room and he would turn the key over to him when he picked up his suitcase to leave.

The end of the month came on Tuesday. On Monday morning Barney slept late. He had packed his suitcase the night before, and in one of his suitcases, hidden by shirts and pajamas, was his brief case with $23,980 in it. Mr. Jackson would give him his final paycheck today, so that he could cash it before leaving town. Tuesday morning he would take the eight o'clock flight for the East.

He went downstairs, still a bit sleepy-eyed. The place was

swarming with policemen! Someone had forced the lock on the file case in the office and had taken cash and checks amounting to something like $1,000, including the heavy end of the month payments for burial insurance that had come in Saturday, when the banks were closed.

Chief Remmy Callison nodded to Barney. "Barney, where'd you pick up this kid Elzy Logan?"

"Oh, a friend recommended him. You don't think he did it, do you?"

"Well, he's not around this morning, the money's missing, he's not here. We've taken a dozen different sets of finger-prints off that metal file case. Bet you ten dollars his prints will be the freshest on the case."

"Hell of an employe you picked for me!" said Mr. Jackson.

"Well I'm sorry," said Barney. "I sure was mistaken in him." He went up to his room and came down with his two suitcases.

"Where you going?" Jackson asked.

"I'm going to Kittery, Maine."

"But you weren't leaving until tomorrow."

"I know," said Barney, "but since I caused you such a mess right here at the end I thought I'd just get the heck out of here."

"Oh, Barney, I didn't mean it. Don't leave sore." He fished in his billfold and pulled out a check. "Here's your pay check and a bonus for the two good years you've given me. And here's a letter of recommendation for you you might want when you're trying to get another job up there in Kittery. And forget about this little break-in. It wasn't your fault."

"Thanks Mr. Jackson. Now I feel better."

He shook hands with Jackson and the rest of the staff, then with Remmy Callison.

At the airport two hours later Barney was getting ready to board a plane heading for Los Angeles, when Assistant Chief Remmy Callison and Identification Officer Sid White stopped him.

"Too bad, Clint Stauffer; too bad," Remmy said. "Just one little error of judgment."

"I know," Barney moaned. "When I hired that fool Elzy! I don't know what our young people are coming to. You can't trust a one these days."

"If he had just waited another week or so to break into that file case, all the Clint Stauffer finger-prints would have been wiped off. He was already loafing on his clean-up work, Clint, but the office girl was going to dust off that case this very morning herself. Too bad, Stauffer!"

THE COMEDY

OF DEATH

While forty million people listened and laughed, a radio top banana died. I had a simple enough job—find Al Harper's killer—and still remain in one piece!

by RICHARD HILL WILKINSON

OF THIS I AM sure: Toots Gaylord did not murder Al Harper.

How do I know? Don't ask me now. There is still an hour before Dana Quenton's newspaper goes to press, and in that time I expect to turn up the evidence to prove my theory.

Where will I begin? Well, there is a fine easy chair in the men's lounge in Studio B of the Allied Broadcasting Company. I am going to sit down in it, light up a cigarette and think.

This would give most anyone a laugh because I am just a dumb cop who is not capable of thinking. Anyone will tell you that. I have taken great pains that people should continue to feel so. You have an advantage when people think you are dumb, especially in a case like this, with Al Harper lying dead with a bullet hole through his heart, and the gun that shot the bullet lying right here in my lap.

A half dozen people have testified that they found Toots Gaylord standing over Harper's body with the gun in his hand thirty seconds after the shot was fired. Of course Toots has denied that he shot Harper, and I am sucker enough to believe him.

I believe he is innocent because he does not have the face of a killer. It is things like that that have given me my reputation for being dumb. What folks forget is that I have been tracking down murderers for twenty years. After that length of time you get so you can pretty often tell by looking at a guy whether or not he is capable of murder.

Well, five minutes of my time is

gone and I haven't gotten anywhere. In another fifty-five minutes the New York *Evening Ledger* will be on the streets and its headlines will scream that Al Harper, top television comedian, has been murdered and that Toots Gaylord, second only in popularity on the air waves to Al himself, is the chief suspect.

If that happens, nothing that I can do will help much. I'll tell you why. For years Al Harper and Toots Gaylord have been carrying on a feud over the air. When Al calls Toots a blubbernose clunkhead, the audience howls with delight and glee. And when Toots confidently tells his viewers that Harper pays off the members of his show with tickets to their own broadcast, the audience reaction is ditto.

Everyone thinks that in private life the two are bosom friends. On that one item of information hangs the success of the entire gag.

If it became known that in private life Harper and Gaylord hated each other and meant every insult they mentioned on the air, audience interest would collapse. And if it became known that Toots' hatred went to the point where he would commit murder, audience interest would not only collapse in the Harper-Gaylord combination, but every other TV feud would be washed up.

Folks would suspect that Hope and Crosby actually hated each other, that Jack Benny was a tightwad, Dean Martin a drunk, Milton Berle a joke thief. And you can see what that would do to the profession.

Charles Evans, the reporter, had been waiting for me when I arrived at the studio two hours earlier. He had been grinning like a Cheshire cat, and I knew what he was thinking.

"Joe," he said, "this is it. This is the story the old man has been waiting for." Charlie's "old man" is Dana Quenton who owns the *Evening Ledger*. He is a grizzled, fire-eating, hard-headed old codger who hates television like poison. He agrees with Newton Minnow that it's a vast wasteland run by a bunch of imbeciles.

Of course, none of his complaining did any good, so the old sourpuss stopped complaining and settled down to devoting the pages of the *Evening Ledger* to a campaign against television. Dana is old and rich and crotchety and doesn't give a damn about anything. A younger man would have stopped beating his head against the wall a long time ago. But not Dana.

"Charlie" I said, "don't make any mistakes. You are a young man. Television, like sex, is here to stay. Quenton has made a jackass out of himself in that dirty sheet of his, and you will do likewise if you stick your neck out."

"Joe," said Charlie, looking at me with mock gravity, "Mr. Quenton is paying me two hundred and

fifty fish a week. That is not hay. It is as plain as the nose on your face, which is considerable, that Toots knocked off Al Harper—and I aim to tell the world about it, partner."

He meant it, too. There were about five hundred people in the studio audience. A couple of cops were guarding the double doors that led to the lobby, and up on the stage were fifty more humans, members of the cast, managers, secretaries, technicians, sound and special effects men. It certainly would have been an easy way out to take Sergent Mike Simpson's word for it and arrest Toots.

Mike Simpson had been working on the case for an hour before I arrived.

"It was Toots Gaylord's show, see," Mike had explained. "Harper was here as a guest star. Well, they cracked back and forth, insulting each other plenty, and the audience ate it up. Toots kept calling Al a cheap skate, and Al kept getting madder and madder.

"Finally Al says, 'Okay, just to show you guys I'm no cheap skate, I'm giving a cocktail party up in my hotel room right after the broadcast, and you're all invited. The only thing is, you'll have to bring your own liquor.'

"The audience howled at that. Then Gaylord says all right he'll take Al up on the party. He'll even bring his own liquor, on account of it will be a good chance to announce his engagement to Glenda Woodbury."

"Who's Glenda Woodbury?" I asked Mike.

Mike jerked his thumb toward a group who were huddled together in the wings. Toots Gaylord was there, tall, skinny, blond and scared looking. Beside him was a hi-octane redhead, and I suddenly remembered that Glenda Woodbury was the singer with *umph.*

"I thought Woodbury worked for Harper," I said.

"That's it," said Mike. "That's the gag, the build-up. She did work for Harper, only it seems that Toots had been taking her out regularly. Tonight they were not only going to announce their engagement but they were also going to announce the fact that Glenda was quitting Harper and going to work for Gaylord.

"All this came out in dialogue between Harper and Gaylord. It was good stuff, see? The audience bellowed, on account of Harper did a burn that was really very funny. Boss, you got a cigarette?"

I offered him my pack. "How do you know they weren't kidding?" I said.

"Well, it was like this," said Mike. "After Harper and Gaylord got through with their banter, Glenda came on to sing. Al and Toots went off stage. It was then that Toots plugged him. No one out here heard the shot on account of there's a soundproof door that sep-

arates the stage from the hall that leads to the dressing rooms."

"If no one heard the shot," I said, "what's the audience so steamed up about?"

"Well, it was Ace Melzo's fault. Ace is—was—Al's bodyguard. An ex-wrestler. He's long on brawn but they short-changed him when it came to brains. He was sitting in Al's dressing room waiting for the program to get done with. He heard the shot and opened the door and saw Al lying on the floor with Toots standing over him, holding the gun.

"Melzo let out a whoop and came galloping onto the stage, bawling that Harper had been shot and he knew who done it.

"At first the audience thought it was part of the show; then there was a stampede for the door. Tex Halpern, a cop that the studio employs to watch the door, did some fast thinking. He banged the door shut and locked it and then sent in a call to headquarters." Mike took a final drag on his cigarette. "Boss, these are good cigarettes you're smoking. You changed your brand or something?"

"Yeah. I been watching the television commercials. Mike, you're a good cop."

Out in the auditorium the audience was getting excited again. A big guy with a pot belly was demanding that they be let out. He was making some of the better known cracks about constitutional rights and his demands as an American citizen, and was getting a lot of support.

I walked over to the group which included Glenda and Toots and Ace and some others. They all looked scared and halfways defiant and belligerent. I stood for a minute just looking at them, and they got uneasy and finally Toots stepped forward.

He cleared his throat, got a grip on himself and started to make a speech.

"I suppose," he said stiffly, "that you'll not believe me either when I say I'm not guilty of this—this murder."

"Well," I said, "are you?"

"Of course not." His chin came up with a jerk. "How could I be? Al was my best friend."

"That's a theory," I said, "that has to be proved or disproved. What's your alibi, Mr. Gaylord?"

"I haven't any alibi. I went off stage while Glenda was singing. I didn't know that Al was behind me. I went into the men's lounge, and while there I heard a shot. I ran back to the hall and saw Al lying on the floor with a gun beside him.

"Naturally it was a shock. I walked over and picked up the gun. I don't know why. I shouldn't have. I was dazed. Then the door to Al's dressing room opened and his gorilla bodyguard came out and began yelling like a madman."

"That sounds fair enough to me," I said.

Gaylord's eyes opened wide.

"Then you—you believe I'm innocent?"

"I didn't say that. Right now, I don't believe anything. Now, look, Mr. Gaylord, I'm just a dumb cop, and this case looks to me like a stickler. I'll probably need all the help I can get."

I studied him a moment. "Mr. Gaylord, it seems to me that I've read a lot of stuff about show people being hot numbers when something tragic occurs in their ranks. Like 'The show must go on,' and 'Laugh, clown, laugh.' That sort of thing."

Toots looked bewildered and glanced at Glenda. She uttered a short, mirthless laugh and said, "I don't know whether or not you're trying to be funny, Lieutenant. This is hardly a time for dramatics—"

"This," I said, "is the only time in my career when dramatics seem to be in order. That crowd out there is getting out of hand. So long as they're ramming around and demanding their rights as good solid tax paying citizens we won't get anywhere in finding out who knocked Harper off."

I had to admire Gaylord for the way he sized things up. "I can see your point, Lieutenant. I—we'll do our best to keep them quiet. I—I'll make a speech."

He did, too. He went out front and told the audience that he understood how they felt and could sympathize with them. He said that it would only be a matter of minutes before all of them would be allowed to go home. In the meantime he and his show would do their best to provide entertainment.

He didn't wait for a reaction. He signaled the band, and they began playing.

I got Mike then, and we went back along the corridor to Harper's dressing room. It wasn't empty. Ace Melzo was there, staring moodily at the floor.

He got up when we came in and began to blubber.

"What am I gonna do now? Mr. Harper was the only friend I had. He took me in when I didn't have a dime and paid me just to be with him. What am I gonna do now? I won't be able to get a job no place. I was just a no-good bum. If I'd known, I'd have fixed Gaylord. I'd have fixed him good so's he wouldn't do no harm to Mr. Harper ever."

"So you didn't know about the quarrel between Mr. Harper and Mr. Gaylord?"

"There wasn't no quarrel. Not till tonight, anyway. Mr. Harper was the swellest guy who ever lived, but I guess he was kinda mad when Gaylord told him about Miss Woodbury, I guess he was at that."

"Did you talk to him between the time he left the stage and when you saw his body lying in the hall?"

"Nope. But I heard the shot. I was sittin' here workin' on my invention—"

"Invention?"

"Sure." A grin suddenly ap-

peared on Ace's battle-scarred face. He reached behind the chair and produced a metal tube about three feet long and an inch in diameter. There were elbows on each end and the openings were covered with glass. "It's a periscope, see? I can look around corners with it and up and over things—"

"And up and under things, I'll bet," said Mike.

"Okay," I said. "You were working on your invention and what happened?"

"Well, I heard a shot. It come from the hall. I opened the door and looked out, and there was Mr. Harper lying on the floor with Toots Gaylord standing over him."

"So you let out a yell," Mike said, disgusted, "like the dumb cluck you are and went bounding out onto the stage to blab out the news."

Melzo glared at Mike. "You wouldn't dare call me a dumb cluck if Mr. Harper was alive. You would n't dare. He—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Ace, did Mr. Gaylord have the gun in his hand when you saw him?"

"Well, no," said Ace. "He didn't." A troubled look came to his big dumb face. "Fact is, I didn't see any gun at all."

Mike snorted. "Of course he didn't. Toots is right-handed. The way he was standing, his right hand would be shielded by his own body from the view of anyone coming into the hall from this room. From what Melzo tells us, he didn't stop to wonder what Toots had done with the gun."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe. Okay, Ace. Take your invention and scram out of here. I want to look around."

Ace went out and along the hall and in a moment we heard the sound of music coming from the stage as he opened the soundproof door that separated the hall from the wings. The door closed again and there was utter complete silence.

I looked around the room. In the center was a table with five poker hands turned face up on it. Poker chips were scattered about, but the largest stacks surrounded an ace high flush in spades.

"Harper was nuts about poker," Mike explained. "It was his form of relaxation. He always got a game going between the end of rehearsal and time to go on the air."

"Who was playing tonight?"

"Harper, Toots, Glenda, Fred Bennett, the announcer and Lee Sandro, one of Toots' writers."

"Who held that spade flush and collected all the chips?"

"Harper. The warning bell sounded just as he laid down his hand, so he raked in the chips and left 'em there till after the broadcast."

We didn't know the value of the chips, so there was no telling how big a game it had been. There were two ash trays, but they only held a few butts, which would indicate

that the game had been of short duration.

Sound came from the stage again as the door was opened, and then stopped with the door's closing. Footsteps came along the corridor, then came a knock.

I nodded at Mike, and Mike jerked the door open. It was Glenda Woodbury. She started inside and then stopped at sight of Mike.

"Oh," she said, "I thought you were alone, Lieutenant."

"Something private you wanted to see me about, Miss Woodbury?" I asked.

"Yes." She hesitated. Her eyes dropped to the card table, then lifted to mine again. It was plain she had something on her mind all right. "I'd like to talk to you alone."

"If it's about Harper's death, we'd better let Mike listen in. He's a man with ideas."

She hesitated again, glanced at Mike, shrugged and sat down. Mike closed the door. Miss Woodbury reached into her handbag, produced a package of cigarettes and lighted one.

She took a deep drag, then sat for a minute staring at the top of the table. "Lieutenant," she said, "Toots Gaylord didn't murder Al Harper."

"You sound pretty sure."

"I am." She pulled nervously on her cigarette. "I know he didn't. He had no reason to. They were close friends."

"According to what they tell me

was said on the broadcast, they hated each other's insides."

She shook her head impatiently. "That was a gag. It was all a build-up. Only Toots and Al and I knew about it. We wanted it to sound genuine, so we didn't tell a soul."

"I don't get it," I said. Mike gave me a look. He not only didn't get it, he didn't believe it.

Glenda jerked her head around suddenly, saw the look on Mike's face and smiled scornfully.

"Oh, I know you don't believe me. Fortunately I can prove what I'm saying." She crushed out her cigarette with nervous little jabs. "Toots would be sore if he knew I was telling you this. He made me promise not to. If you had any understanding of people at all you'd know that it's because Toots is innocent that he's keeping his mouth shut. He read somewhere once that innocent men never pay for crimes they don't commit, and he believes it. He's rather naive." She hesitated. "You see, we know that Al was retiring from television. This was to be his last broadcast."

"Go on," I said.

"Al's been suffering from heart

trouble. Not a soul knew about it, because he felt that it would be bad for business to make the information public. About a month ago Al's doctor told him he'd have to quit work or else. But—well, he was worried about my career. So he talked things over with Toots and they cooked up tonight's gag.

"Next week I was going to start singing for Toots, and every once in awhile Al would appear as guest star on the program until I'd become established. You see, there'd be a terrific audience interest in me because everyone would wonder or not if Al would get me to go back to work for him."

Mike let out his breath.

"Nuts!" he said.

"Mike," I said, "shut up. We can check Miss Woodbury's story with Gaylord and with Harper's doctor. Also, the autopsy will prove whether or not he had heart trouble."

There was a scratching sound outside the door. Mike took three quick steps in that direction and yanked it open. Charlie Evans almost fell inside.

He looked startled for a minute, then grinned smugly. "Well, well, well! Look who's here! May I come in?"

Glenda, who had turned to see who the intruder was, leaped to her feet and pointed a trembling finger at the reporter. Her cheeks were pale.

"Charlie Evans, if you print one word of that story I'll—"

"You'll what, baby?" Charlie asked easily.

Glenda just stared at him for a moment and you could see her face working. Then she dropped back into the chair and buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

"Hysterical women," said Charlie sadly, and clucked his tongue.

"Shall I get a doc, Boss?" Mike asked.

"No, she'll be all right." I looked at Charlie. "Charlie," I said, "it will be okay for you to print the story. Give it the business. Everything. Just as it happened."

Charlie started to say something and then, as the significance of what I'd said dawned on him, he gave me a double take and his mouth fell open.

"Huh?" he grunted. "What was that, Lieutenant?"

"I said to go ahead and write your story. Just don't come bellyaching to me afterward if you get a few facts wrong, that's all."

Charlie's eyes narrowed. He looked from me to Mike, then back to me again. "What is this? What's the gag?"

"No gag." I began. Just then Glenda screamed at me: "You rat! You filthy double-crossing rat! And I was sucker enough to think you'd give Toots a break if I told the truth. Why, I—"

"Mike," I said to Mike, "get these two out of here. Now!"

Mike, who can be depended upon

(*Please turn to page 138*)

Meet LITTLE SISTER

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

ACTUALLY, she's not so little, this dynamic girl agent whom Alexander Waverly describes to his top men as "An armful of dark-haired danger." She's sultry April Dancer, the brilliant new queen of espionage and sudden death who has joined forces with U.N.C.L.E. in its never ending war with the evil that is THRUSH. Every issue of *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. Magazine* will feature April Dancer and her partner, Mark Slate, in a brand-new lead novel streamlined to your reading pleasure and starring the most sensational cast of spy luminaries ever to take a reading public by storm.

> METRO GOLDWYN MAYER-ARENA'S *smashing nation-wide television show, like this, its magazine counterpart now has a sensational new partner, "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.". It has already joined its famous* BIG BROTHER *to make the U.N.C.L.E. adventures the most talked-about thrill in the world of spy fiction. Be sure to follow them also in this great new magazine,* THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

AND REMEMBER—The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. will continue to present, each month, the kind of high octane stories you like, featuring and co-starring with April Dancer the brilliant Mark Slate, "The man whose business is Danger." Plus, of course, Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin and Alexander Waverly, the famous U.N.C.L.E. trouble-threesome who have revolutionized spy adventure fiction everywhere.

APRIL DANCER *and Mark Slate know how to live—and how to die, if the time comes. You'll vote this great new series tops in your reading hit parade. Reserve your next copy now! It's a sell out in many cities already!*

to act with agility if necessary, obeyed the order with dispatch. But even after the door closed we could hear Glenda Woodbury's hysterical sobs receding down the hall.

"Phew!" said Mike and plopped down into a chair. He looked up at me and grinned sardonically. "If half of what that Woodbury dame says is true, we've got another lovely suspect in Jim Turner. He was Harper's male singer. Before tonight, Turner's future depended upon Harper. Suppose Turner knew what Harper was doing for Woodbury? Maybe Turner didn't like that, especially if Harper planned to leave him out on a limb—"

"Mike," I said, "go out and dig me up a reason why Ace Melzo should murder Harper."

"Huh?" said Mike.

"It won't have to be a good reason," I said. "Melzo is practically a half-wit with a hypersensitive emotional quotient. He could go off half cocked for nothing more serious than being called a dumb cluck by a police sergeant."

Mike moistened his lips. "Think so?" he said.

"Know so. He could have gone off half-cocked and shot Harper and regretted it a moment later. Anyhow, dig up a motive. I'll be in the lounge down the hall doing some telephoning."

There was a guy on a ladder in front of the door to the lounge. He was just finishing polishing the transom.

I didn't wait. I ducked in under the ladder and opened the door. The guy started to say something, but I told him to shut up. I'd come here to think and didn't care a damn about kookie superstitions about walking under ladders.

So now it is 11:55 o'clock and in five minutes Dana Quenton's extra is scheduled to go to press.

If Charlie Evan's story is printed, Quenton will have delivered a severe blow to television—unless I do something to stop him, and I intended to. A lot has happened during the past fifty-five minutes.

At exactly 11:30 I had happened to glance up at the transom. The window washer was gone, but suddenly a round cylinder-like object appeared. I watched it, fascinated. Slowly it turned to the right, then started to the left, toward me. It reminded me of a prehistoric serpent with a huge single eye that I'd once seen in a movie.

I got up and walked over to the door and threw it open.

Ace Melzo had one eye glued to the bottom end of his "periscope." He looked up and grinned at me foolishly.

"Hi!" he said. "I was just tryin' out my invention."

"A fine place to try it out," I said.

Ace glanced over my shoulder and his foolish grin broadened. "Yeah," he said, "that's what I figured."

"Punk," I said, "scram out of here. If I catch you trying out your

invention again, I'll have you locked up."

At 11:35 Mike had come pounding along the hall. He went past the door to the lounge, and I got up and went out into the hall and yelled at him.

He came back, giving me a queer look, glancing over my shoulder.

"What happened?" I asked.

Mike swallowed. "Someone plugged Charlie Evans while he was telephoning in his story."

"Dead?"

"No. But it didn't do him any good. He got it in the shoulder. I've sent for an ambulance."

"Who did it?"

"I arrested Melzo."

"Why?"

"Well, you told me to dig up a motive for Melzo killing Harper. I did. Melzo sat in on the poker game tonight. The last two hands Harper cleaned him. The way I figure it, Melzo got brooding about it and when Harper came back to his dressing room, Ace shot him."

"Pretty thin," I said, "but maybe it will do. Anyhow, Ace is trying to cover up something. He said there wasn't any quarrel between Harper and Gaylord that he knew about until tonight's broadcast. Then he said he hadn't talked to Harper between the beginning of the broadcast and the time he heard the shot. So how could he know anything about the quarrel?"

I looked at Mike thoughtfully for a minute. "It wasn't Melzo who plugged Charlie Evans, though."

"No?"

"Melzo was here, looking in over the transom with his periscope."

Mike glanced over my shoulder again and grinned. "The rascal!" he said. "Not so dumb at that, eh?"

I went back and lighted up a cigarette, discovered it was the last one in the pack, and swore.

Just then the telephone rang, and for ten minutes I was busy jotting down notes on information that the guy at headquarters had been getting at my request.

At 11:45 Mike had come along the hall again, and he looked excited.

"Boss," he said, "a hell of a thing has happened."

"Well?" I said.

"The report from the autopsy just came in. Harper was dead before the bullet even entered his body."

"How did he die?"

"Poison."

I thought this over.

"How's the audience?" I said. "Gaylord keeping them entertained?"

Mike shrugged. "Yeah. Gaylord and his gang have got 'em rolling in the aisles. It's quite a thing. I mean, a guy accused of murder being so funny."

"Yeah," I said. "Quite a thing. Well, we only have ten minutes to

go. Go on back to the stage, Mike. I have to think."

I sat down again in the easy chair and snubbed out the cigarette and reached for another. Then I remembered that the pack was empty, and began hunting in the ashtray for a sizable butt. All I found was a lot of loose tobacco that some idiot had emptied into the tray.

So now it is 11:59 and I am reaching for the phone to call Dana Quenton and tell him how I know it was not Toots Gaylord who murdered Al Harper.

Everything had happened in the past four minutes.

At 11:56 heels had come clicking along the hall and stopped outside the room where I was sitting. Then the door opened and Glenda Woodbury started in.

At sight of me she stopped short. For a minute I couldn't fathom the expression that came into her face. It was a look of genuine surprise—sumperimposed, I should say, by irritation and even amusement.

"Why, Lieutenant!" she said. "Fancy meeting you *here!*"

She cast a quick glance over her shoulder, then looked back at me and suddenly she was wholly composed and smiling brightly.

"Well!" she said, and then her eyes fell to the ashtray over which I had been bending. She stopped smiling, but only for an instant.

"Looking for cigarette butts, Lieutenant?" She opened her handbag. "Here, have one of mine. One not slightly used."

I am just a dumb cop and not very quick on the trigger. This conversation had consumed about thirty seconds, and in that time a lot of thoughts had pounded into my brain. They came so fast that I must confess that for a moment I only sat there blinking at her owlishly.

That's how Glenda happened to get the gun in her hand without me stopping her. She had it in her handbag beside the pack of cigarettes.

"What a pity, Lieutenant. And I was just beginning to like you. Really." She smiled mockingly and kicked the door shut with her foot. She had a scarf around her hair and she untied it and wrapped it around the hand that held the gun.

"I don't think they will hear the shot, do you, Lieutenant? Especially with everyone on the stage and the soundproof door closed." She laughed softly, and her eyes drifted meaningly around the room. "In fact, I think I will have time to put a lot of distance between the studio and myself before anyone thinks of looking for you here."

I winced at the emphasis she placed on the last word. I understood.

So I grinned back at her and started to say something—and let drive with the ashtray, about which my hand had been closed all

this time. There was a lot of loose tobacco in the tray, as I have stated before, and some of it got into Glenda's eyes. She uttered a little scream and pulled the trigger of the gun, and I heard the shot go whining past my ear.

Then I had her.

They finally put me through to Quenton and I began explaining things to the old boy.

"The trouble with you, Quenton, is you're not an artist. You haven't any soul. If you had, you'd know that Gaylord nor anyone else could go on the air and be a funny man if he'd been guilty of committing murder a half hour before.

"What's that? Who murdered Harper? Why, the Woodbury dame! Yeah, Glenda Woodbury. You see, a long time ago Glenda had a husband. Her name was Mary Akerson then. They split up and Glenda went into television. Trouble was, she neglected to divorce Akerson. Well, sir, along comes this big chance with Harper, and she grabbed it. Then she found out about Harper's poor health, so she began playing up to Gaylord, who was better looking and just as rich. She made the guy fall for her. They were going to get married. That's why she defended him to me. Looking out for her own future.

"Then along comes hubby, demanding either her money or his wife. Glenda decides to pay him off until she can get the contract signed with Gaylord. Trouble is she runs out of dough before the time for the contract signing. Akerson, of course, doesn't know what her game is, or about Harper quitting television. So he tries to shake Harper down, thinking that Al will pay off to save himself some poor publicity by having Glenda exposed.

"Harper puts the thing up to Glenda and Glenda breaks down and confesses and begs him not to tell Toots. But Harper and Toots are good friends, see? Get that. Harper and Toots are good friends.

"Al doesn't want to see his friend get sucked in on a blackmail deal any more than himself. So he decides, right after tonight's broadcast, to put Toots wise. And he made the mistake of telling Glenda his intentions.

"How did she do it? Poison. Poison which she put into a cigarette after removing some of the tobacco. What kind of poison? How should I know? Something that produced the same reaction as mustard gas, I suppose. Yeah. Slow acting. The lab is working on it now. Anyway, it was deadly to a man suffering with heart trouble.

"Yeah, five of them were playing poker. Harper ran out of cigarettes, as Glenda had previously arranged for him to do. Then she offered him one of hers, making sure it was the right one.

"What? How about your star

reporter getting it in the shoulder? Well, that too was Glenda. Naturally, she didn't want her television career ruined by unfavorable publicity. And how do I know it was Glenda? Simple. There were only two shots fired from her gun. One for Charlie and one for me. The slugs will match.

"Then who shot Harper? Al Melzo did. Only Harper died of the poison before Ace slugged him. Yeah, they got him.

"What? How am I so sure that it was Glenda who loaded the cigarette?

"Well, she's the only female member of the cast. And the cast has a particular lounge set aside for their own use.

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. I found the loose tobacco in the ash tray in the ladies' lounge. I've been sitting here in the ladies' lounge all the time and didn't know it!"

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COUNTERPLOT

new JOHN POND story

Hidden, lethal, three spies plied their trade. How to find them? First of all . . .

by DANIEL FRENCH

THE FOUR-STAR GENERAL waited until his office door closed behind John Pond. He held out his hand. "I asked for the best man

your ultra-secret agency could recommend. I hope I have him. A situation has developed which can turn out to be sticky, and we must get outside help!"

"What's your problem, General?" Pond said.

"At one of our secret missile-launching test bases, we have discovered there are five spies at work. We caught two of them with their transmitters, but they cannot, or will not, divulge the identity of the other three."

"They don't know their identities, sir," Pond said. "That's the way the KGB works."

"Very well. How do we get rid of the other three?"

"I'm glad you didn't say capture them, because that might be impossible if the base is big, as I suspect it must be. However, we can destroy their usefulness in a few days."

"You tell me how, Mr. Pond," the general begged.

"Give publicity to the arrest of the pair you have in custody, but don't use the names they gave you. Don't describe them; just say they are locked up. You have the radio transmitters they were using? Good, I'd like them."

"But how will publicizing the arrest of this pair destroy the others, Mr. Pond?"

"Wait, and see."

The general wasn't used to being second-guessed by a mere civilian.

"I'll wait," he said, rather grimly. "But I hope you come up with the right answers."

He didn't have to wait long. Within two weeks, three men suddenly left the missile base. When their records were checked, they had to be spies. They shouldn't have gotten past security in the first place.

The general was all smiles, inviting John Pond to dinner at the officer's club the next week.

"How did you figure it out?" he said. "We didn't have a thing to go on, you know."

"Begging your pardon—we did, sir." Pond took a long sip of his scotch. It was good.

He said, "Remember, we had put two of KGB's operatives out of circulation, and they knew it. But —they were still getting regular broadcasts from five men! Two of those broadcasts had to be false. But which ones?"

John Pond grinned, a little crookedly. "They couldn't find out, of course. It must have bugged the hell out of them. They could only do one thing. Pull their three remaining operatives out of the job and give up."

The general blinked. He knew when he was licked.

"Have another drink," he said. "And don't fail to leave your phone number. When I get in trouble again, I at least know the right man to call."

Illya and (David McCallum) Napoleon (Robert Vaughn)

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